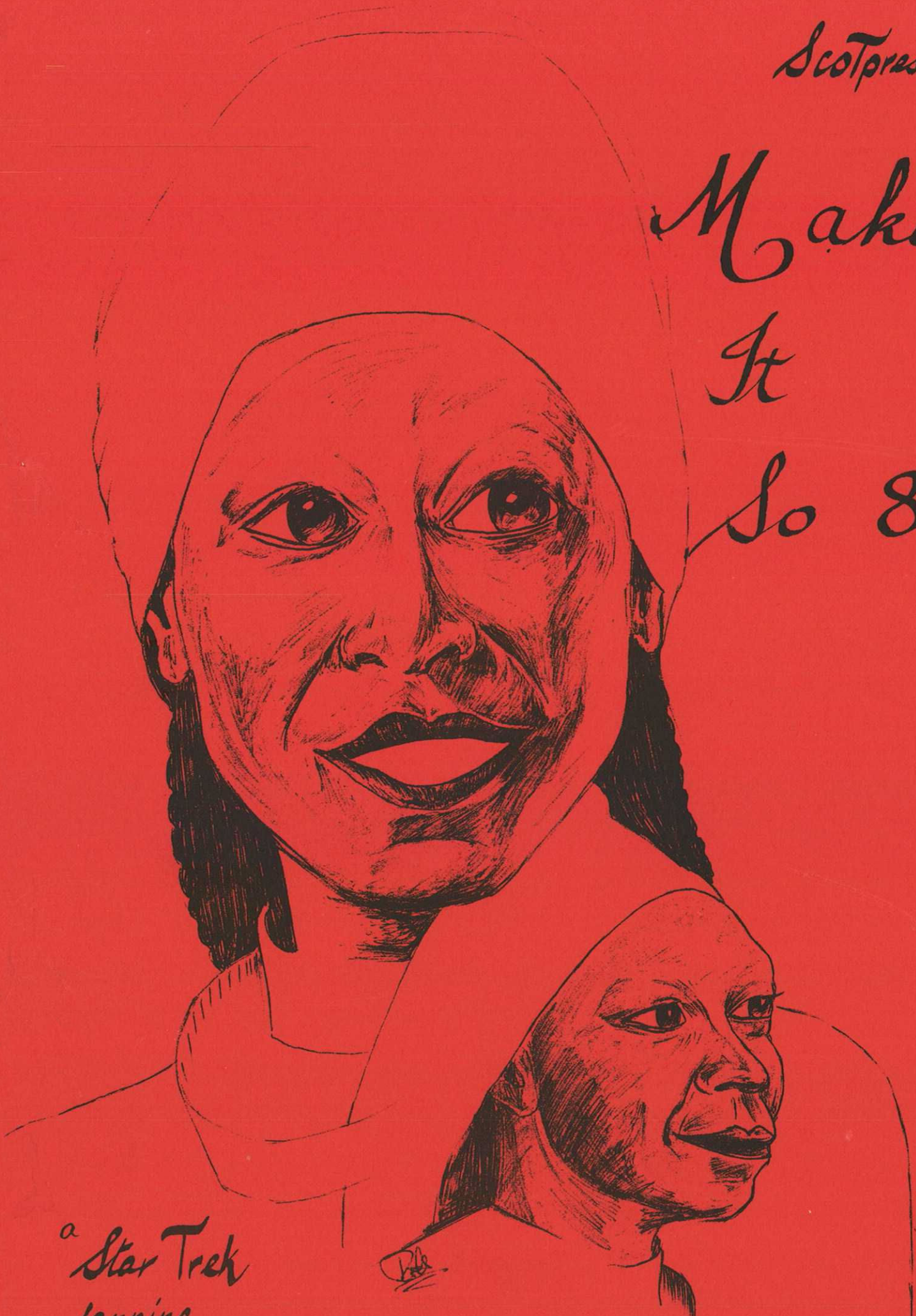


Scotpress

Make
It
So 8



^a Star Trek
fanzine

Bob

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Illustrations - Ruth Mellor Cover, P 14, P17
Lorraine Goodison P 32

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Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Sheila Clark, Lisa Dearnley Davison, Michael Simpson,
Gaile Wood

Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

COMING HOME

by

Morag Phillips

She had seen holopics, of course. And once, at Starbase 74, she had half seen the Enterprise slipping back into dock. The sense of relief she had felt at that time was a pale shadow of the feeling that engulfed her now.

Shipping aboard with a cargo of delicate medical supplies, Dr. Beverly Crusher was treated to a long, slow approach to one of the biggest ships in the Fleet - and the most beautiful. The pilot, Lt. Singh, glanced at his passenger and catching the wonder shining in her eyes, altered his flight plan.

"Enterprise, this is shuttle ten. I'm going to come in off the port bow, passing under the saucer. Check clearance."

"Check, Avil. No probs," responded the flight controller in shuttle-jockey-speak.

Singh allowed himself a small smile before returning his attention to his instruments. He had seen it all dozens of times before, but for a moment the freshness of her perspective renewed his own appreciation. His eyes soon wandered back to the forward viewport.

The USS Enterprise, Starfleet registry NCC-1701-D, hung in high orbit above the ringed planet Tiberion, the star-specked black of deep space providing a perfect backdrop. Pale reflected sunlight gleaming on the hull made the ship glow purest white. She was a creature of power and grace, her warp nacelles wings folded in repose. A vessel of her size should have seemed bulky and unattractive; but this Galaxy class craft was smooth and sleek and carried the impression of great power held in check by elegant discipline. The rounded curves of the saucer blended effortlessly into the swoop and stretch of the warp drive section. Nothing, fussy or functional, spoiled her lines.

To Beverly Crusher the Enterprise was the most welcome vision of perfection. And she was home. As the shuttle cruised along the line of the starboard nacelle and swung round to beetle under the saucer, that realisation finally came to her.

When Dr. Crusher had accepted the post of Chief of Medicine, Starfleet Headquarters, twelve months earlier, the decision had been made hastily. Confused and conflicting emotions had been churning within her for months previously. Unresolved grief for her husband had mixed with a sense of infidelity as she found herself increasingly attracted to Picard. The abrupt death of Walker Keel, following hard on the senseless loss of Tasha Yar, had badly shaken her. How many more dear friends could she bear to lose? Forced by events to ask herself certain questions, her answers shocked and

frightened her. Other than her son, there was one whose death, she knew with certainty, she would not survive. That knowledge created a sense of betraying Jack - a feeling which, along with more guilt, joined the melee already swirling within her. The unexpected offer of that elite posting had come at just the right moment.

Perhaps, on reflection, it had been the wrong moment; for it had provided her with an escape route from herself, and she had fled, accepting the post, surprising her friends and leaving them a little hurt. Not even Deanna Troi had fully divined her reasons for leaving; and the one who could have made her stay, could have wiped away her doubts with a word, had simply congratulated her and wished her luck.

The shuttle was travelling through the Enterprise's shadow now. Instead of straining her eyes to make out details behind the glowing portholes, Beverly Crusher was lost in remembering.

Saying goodbye to Wes had been difficult and left her so drained that she had almost been only a spectator at the gathering which had met in the transporter room to send her on her way. She had felt oddly distant and had barely heard Will Riker's words of encouragement and good wishes. He had clasped her hand tightly and smiled warmly, lines of strain showing round his eyes. Remotely, she had thought that he needed to rest; recent events must have taken their toll on him, too. Still thinking of Will, she had smiled distractedly as Picard had shaken her hand almost perfunctorily and said something in his best public speaking voice. Her head had been ringing and she could not speak. Then she had been gone, her last sight aboard, Deanna's dark eyes, magnified by tears.

For a while, the chaos of reorganising her new offices and staff had driven all other thoughts from her mind. When she did have a spare moment, Beverly thought of her son, the ache of missing him a new pain - especially when he had called and nervously told her that he wanted to stay on the Enterprise. For a moment she had stared at his pale, anxious face; then she had stifled the urge to cry, "No!" and seize him to her. Instead she had swallowed and nodded and tried to smile in response to his delighted grin. When the transmission ended a few minutes later she had locked the office door and cried for hours, more than just anguish for her child's absence pouring out of her heart.

Beverly Crusher's work swallowed her up. The enormity of her tasks as CMO for the entire Fleet monopolised her attention and kept her mind firmly desk-bound. That became the problem. Soon the oppressive weight of administration became a dark cloud dogging her steps. In ten years, this was the longest she had spent planetside and the Earth began to feel too small. Perhaps if practical medicine had formed a larger percentage of her duties the Doctor could have accepted being planetbound, but she found that she had swapped cutting-edge, frontier medicine for bureaucracy-bound resource shuffling and politicking. It began to smother her.

The night that Beverly Crusher found herself on the roof of the Medical Corps building staring at the stars was the night she realised where she belonged. Pushing aside the sick, sinking feeling that she could not hope to return to the Enterprise (her replacement would be well tenured by now and she had no right to ask Pulaski to step aside) she had simply determined to be amongst the stars. She had smiled grimly to herself. Any old tub would do. And if it turned out that changing her mind like this put too many

noses out of joint at the Admiralty, she would threaten to hand in her papers and take a job on a commercial liner. With her record and reputation, she would have been able to pick her passage. She had called Admiral Kyoshi the next day.

A month later she was coming home. Pulaski had decided to return to the suddenly vacant post aboard the *Repulse* and Picard had signalled Kyoshi for a replacement. Kyoshi had called Crusher and she had had her bags packed before the end of the day. Incredulous at this sudden turn of good fortune, she had missed her regular call to Wesley, knowing that he would not worry; that he would simply blame the vagaries of subspace communication and expect a letter instead.

Butterflies fluttered unexpectedly and doubt seized the Doctor as the shuttle slipped through the atmosphere-retaining forcefield and glided to a gentle touchdown in the shuttlebay. Lt. Singh locked off the restraining bolts and deactivated the engines in silence.

Suddenly she could not move. What if the friends she had abandoned so abruptly a year before had become fond of Kate Pulaski and thought that she had used her position to... ?

"Doctor?" Lt. Singh had risen and was frowning at the ashen-faced CMO. "We're clear to disembark, ma'am."

"Thank you." Dr. Crusher seemed to recover and stood. She smiled and the young pilot became suddenly bashful. "And thanks for the tour, Lieutenant."

"It was my pleasure, Doctor. Uh - may I ask you something?" He cleared his throat.

"You can ask." She swung her bag over her shoulder.

"Are you *the* Dr. Crusher?"

Beverly turned quizzically in the doorway to the main compartment. "Depends. Which one do you mean?"

"I shipped aboard about the same time as Dr. Pulaski. I heard all sorts of scuttlebutt about... "

"The old dragon who ran sickbay before?" interrupted Beverly sternly. Lt. Singh looked mortified. Beverly smiled slightly and nodded. "Yes, I'm that Dr. Crusher. I hope your medical specs are up to date?"

"Oh, yes. Dr. Pulaski was very particular," nodded Singh blithely. Then he seemed to think that he had blundered, and became awkward. "I mean... "

"I'm glad to hear that. Do you want to get the hatch?" Beverly gestured for the young man to release the pressure seals. He became over-anxious and fumbled the lock controls. He sighed with relief when the hatch finally cracked and opened. The Doctor laid a calming hand on his forearm. "Thanks, Avil." She passed him and hopped lightly onto the deck of the *Enterprise*.

The Shuttlebay Chief up in his control booth squinted at

Singh's passenger as she stepped down. He rose, a grin spreading across his bristling face. "Take over, Dan. I'm going down," he informed his assistant, and left the cubicle.

He reached the deck just as Dr. Crusher finished her instructions to the loading crew. "I'd rather they were late getting to sickbay than damaged!" she called. Then she sensed someone behind her and turned to find the Chief grinning at her, his hands on his hips.

"If I'd known you were coming I'd've had a welcome party here to whistle you aboard!" he announced cheerfully. Burke stuck out a shovel of a hand and seized Dr. Crusher's slim fingers in his.

"Hello, Padraic." She returned his grin happily.

"Is this a flying visit?" he demanded, his eyes taking in her bulky shoulder bag. She shook her head and thought for a moment that the huge, expressive man was going to wrap her in a bear hug. He restrained himself and swiped her bag instead. "Then double welcome!" he boomed. Then he frowned. "Why didn't you signal ahead?"

"I thought I would just sneak aboard and see if anyone noticed I'd been gone," she shrugged.

"Oh, we noticed. Pulaski was a fine doctor but she didn't have deep space exploration in her bones. Not like you. Earth too small, huh?"

Beverly stared at the Bay Chief in astonishment. She had known him for years yet never ceased to be amazed by his flashes of perception.

He nodded. Taking her silence as assent, he led the way to the turbolift.

"Pad? Do me a favour?" she asked as he placed her bag inside the lift.

"Sure." He nodded.

"When you tell the bridge that the new CMO has arrived, don't mention my name. Just say I've gone straight to sickbay."

"Oh, I don't know." Burke feigned dubiousness, then grinned and nodded. "But it'll cost you dinner."

"Done." Beverly pretended to be disgusted by his price and Burke's amiable grin stretched even wider. He tossed her a casual salute and stepped back to let the lift doors close.

It would not take long for news of Beverly Crusher's presence aboard to spread through the ship. Several people had recognised her, disbelief showing in their disciplined faces, on her short walk from the turbolift to sickbay. Ben Yakimoto, who had been on the ship practically since its commission, had stared at her then whooped with glee upon her entry. She smiled and shushed him silently and passed into the office. She dropped her bag on the desk and looked around.

There had been few changes. The pictures were the same and none of the plants had been moved, only well tended. Evidently Pulaski had shared her disregard for the aesthetics of their work environment. She inhaled deeply and smiled as her nose, now unused to the filtered and processed air of a closed environment, detected the faint, almost subliminal essence of pine.

She turned as the door opened and Deanna Troi burst in. She glanced into the main ward then spotted Beverly and smiled broadly, hurrying into the office and, after only a fractional hesitation, embraced the Doctor.

"Welcome home," sniffed Deanna. The two women released each other and Deanna, without fuss, wiped the tears from her face. "I thought I sensed you, and when Burke failed to name the new CMO I felt certain that I was not mistaken. Then I felt Ben's elation as I came out of the lift." Deanna grinned. "I am so pleased to see you!"

"And I you. It's good to be home." Beverly sighed and lowered herself into the desk chair - the lumbar support would have to be adjusted. "Home," she repeated with feeling.

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming?" demanded Deanna, aggrieved.

"I wasn't sure how I would be received," admitted Beverly, knowing that the Counselor would pick up on her uncertainty anyway.

Deanna looked shocked. "Beverly! We have all missed you!" Troi skirted the desk quickly. Desperate to reassure her friend, she laid a hand on her shoulder. "Your return will complete the... the family once again."

There was a moment's silence.

"Deanna... I read the reports on your pregnancy. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

Deanna withdrew her hand. A year of unknowns lay between them, but Beverly knew enough to know that the Betazoid was also pulling in her emotional contacts. Evidently the experience had been too painful, was still too close to the surface, to bear discussion.

"I'm sorry," repeated Beverly.

Deanna nodded. Apology accepted; subject closed.

"The Captain will be pleased to see you."

"Will he?" The Doctor's voice wavered a little.

Deanna smiled slightly. They had traded one emotional admission for another. She nodded. "He was shaken by your departure. The suddenness. He blamed himself. Felt that if he could have admitted to you his pain at Walker's death..." Deanna stopped speaking, aware that she was coming dangerously close to betraying the Captain's confidence in her.

"It wasn't his fault," sighed Beverly. Her head bowed for a second then rose, her eyes distant. "Did he ever tell you what I used to call them?"

"The Three Musketeers," nodded Deanna.

"Walker Keel, Jean-Luc and Jack. I have lost two of them, Deanna. A year ago I could not have borne to be witness to the death of the last."

"And now?" asked Deanna softly. "Beverly? Why have you come back to the Enterprise?"

Again a pause. Beverly frowned, trying out sentences in her head and discarding them, before saying, "I never thought, when I decided to return to space duty, that I would make it back here."

"But you felt that at least in space you would be a little closer to... "

"This ship," interrupted Beverly quickly. "My home. I couldn't bear to be so far away, stranded on Earth, whilst my heart - " She stopped and swallowed. "My son is on this ship. This is where I belong. Even when he leaves for the Academy this will still be where I should be."

Deanna nodded, knowledge causing the corners of her mouth to turn up. "Do you want me to tell him that you are back?"

"No." Beverly smiled quirkily. "I'd like to see his face."

"He will expect you to report to the bridge. If not in person, at least over the comm," pointed out Deanna.

"I know," frowned Beverly, stumped.

"Leave it to me," announced Deanna, heading for the door. She paused. "And truly - welcome home."

Dr. Crusher sat for a moment in silent contemplation then rose and walked into the main ward. She found Ben Yakimoto, still grinning, monitoring the feed of a regenerative drug into the arm of a recumbent crewman. "Hello, Ben," she smiled.

"Hello, Doctor. Home to stay?"

"Yes. I'll need a full inspection later today."

"We're all ready for you. I was surprised not to be told who we were getting."

"Yes." Beverly grinned impishly then straightened her face. "Anything I need to know here?"

"This is Ensign Onwukee. He fell from an inspection platform in engineering and shattered his leg. Dr. Pulaski set up his regen programme before she left."

"I was sorry to have missed her." Beverly flipped open her tricorder and adjusted the parameters of its scan field.

"Dr. Pulaski refused to use the transporter unless she absolutely had to," smiled Ben tolerantly. "The Repulse had to ship out early, so if she wanted to shuttle over she had to leave before you got here. She asked me to apologise to her replacement."

"All right. I'll study her logs later. Let me see this man's

specs."

Deanna Troi's re-emergence onto the bridge turned two heads: Worf's, whose job it was to glare at everyone who stepped out of the lifts; and Riker's, whose business it was to monitor the staff, not only on the bridge but on the entire ship. Worf's attention quickly returned to his work station but Riker's stayed with her, half turning his body so he could watch her walking down the ramp and struggling not to grin. Riker frowned curiously and shifted his feet to turn to question her, but he caught the slight lift of Picard's eyebrow and he turned quickly back to the main viewer instead.

Picard glanced at Deanna and acknowledged her return with a cordial nod. Then he looked at her again. "Something wrong, Counselor?" he asked quietly.

"Absolutely not, sir." She shook her head and bit down on a smile.

Picard's curiosity deepened. He leaned against the opposite arm of his seat, his arms folded, and gazed at the face of his Betazoid adviser. "May I ask where you were, Counselor?" he asked lightly.

"Sickbay, sir," she replied innocently. Her eyes fixed on the image of Tiberion.

"Indeed." Picard tapped his chin thoughtfully then rose. "You have the bridge, Number One. Carry on."

"Aye, sir." Riker waited until he heard the aft doors close before lowering himself into the command seat and ordering briskly, "Worf. Inform Tiberion control that we are ready to leave. Helm. Lay in a course for Thesallis II; take us out of orbit and stand by." Then he leaned towards Deanna and hissed, "What's up?"

"Beverly Crusher is back on board," she whispered conspiratorially.

Riker blinked. "You mean as CMO?"

Deanna nodded. Riker's expression was unreadable but she could sense his emotions better than anyone else's, and knew that he was glad - even if it was only because this would mean that he would not have to break in a new ship's doctor.

Picard entered sickbay and looked around. The suite appeared to be quite deserted. He stepped into the main ward.

"Yakimoto? Has the new CMO arrived?"

"Yes, Captain. The Doctor is checking out our supplies, sir."

"Thank you." Picard walked to the office and the adjacent operating theatre and stopped at the open door of the storage locker. The bright overhead light illuminated a very familiar back. Picard folded his arms and stood in the doorway. Since Deanna's return to the bridge he had had a gut feeling about the identity of

the new doctor. Only now did he admit to himself that the reason he had never asked Headquarters to name the new CMO was that he had not wanted to hear another name.

"It is customary for new senior staff to request permission to come aboard, Doctor." He tried to sound stern.

Beverly turned. She was pale, he was disturbed to notice, and the datapad she held in both hands was shaking slightly. "My apologies, Captain." She swallowed.

Picard did not move. He simply studied her.

Her hair was a shade lighter than the rich dark red he was used to. If anything she was even thinner. Without shipboard routine she had probably forgotten to eat regularly. Picard stepped into the small room and extended his hand.

"Welcome aboard."

Beverly took his hand and her shaking ceased as he covered their grip with his free hand. "You won't find it so easy to leave us again."

"It wasn't easy, and it won't happen again," she promised.

"I'm relieved to hear that." Picard released her hand but did not step back. A small smile played about her lips and he felt the familiar tightening in his throat that her presence had always engendered in him. He folded his arms. "May I ask you something?"

Beverly stepped back half a pace and nodded. "Of course."

"Why did you leave?"

"Why?" She wrapped her arms around herself and for a moment looked as if she had something important to say. Something impossible. She shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," she said drily.

"But you did not take the accompanying promotion?" He was nonplussed.

"No. I hadn't earned it," she explained. "Besides, no medic who rises above the rank of commander ever manages to secure a permanent shipboard posting again."

"So you never intended to stay on Earth?" frowned Picard.

"Consciously, yes. Subconsciously? Well..." She spread her hands at their surroundings and smiled. "I guess not. Though once I realised it, I never thought I would be lucky enough to be reassigned here."

"It is our good fortune, Doctor. And my pleasure to welcome you home." He smiled. She coloured slightly and Picard stepped away rather too quickly. He turned in the doorway. "As soon as it is convenient, please report to the bridge."

"Is now too soon?"

Heads turned in the corridor as the CMO and the Captain walked abreast and in perfect step to the turbolift. Once inside and in motion, Beverly asked, "Is my son on the bridge?"

"Yes. He's turning into a very capable young man."

"I'm glad." Picard glanced at her and saw something else. She knew he had noticed. "It worries me sometimes that he's so like Jack," she admitted.

"Lift hold!" barked Picard. "Is that why you've come back? To keep an eye on Wesley?" he demanded. Unwarranted anger sparked in his eyes.

"Jean-Luc! He's my son! I have a perfect right to be anxious about him!" she retorted defensively. Picard stared at his boots pensively. "But that's not why I'm here." He watched her face now. "Of course I missed him. But I knew he was being well looked after." She sighed.

"Quite," nodded Picard, satisfied.

"Besides," she added, "where else in the entire Galaxy would he find such admirable role models?"

"Oh?" Picard seemed uncomfortable. "Bridge." The lift moved on.

"Yes. Will Riker. Data. And you."

Picard seemed surprised. "Me? I would not have thought so."

"You were his father's hero. I'm afraid that makes you something of an idol to a teenage boy." She smiled, teasing a little.

"Oh, lord." Picard rolled his eyes dramatically. "I'm not sure I'm up to the responsibility." He smiled. "And you should add Worf to that list. He has been tucking him in at night, after all."

They glanced at each other and shared a chuckle at the thought.

The turbolift arrived.

Worf was the first to notice. Turning from the tactical station and stiffening to attention, the mighty Klingon honoured her with his posture - the closest he would ever come to admitting that her presence pleased him. Worf inclined his head. "Doctor."

Picard hung back, watching as Beverly Crusher walked slowly down the ramp, her eyes glistening as she gazed at the familiar scene. Will Riker was standing in front of the command seat, his hands on hips, grinning at her through his - to her - strange beard. Data, intent on his ops panel, did not look round until Riker said, "Mr. Solus, please relieve Ensign Crusher."

Wes turned, frowning, then stared in disbelief at the slender figure waiting at the foot of the ramp. He leaped to his feet - as Riker had anticipated - and bounded across the deck towards his mother. Just before he flung his arms around her he pulled up short, remembering who she was, who he was and where they were. He stood to attention instead.

"Welcome aboard, Doctor," he said stiffly. Hurt and pride

mingled in the CMO's eyes.

"It's all right, Wes," said Deanna quietly.

Wes glanced at her then relaxed and grinned at his mother. Her relief was evident as she held out her arms to him and they stepped into an embrace.

"Mom." His voice cracked and he hid his face in her hair. Beverly, for her part, simply tightened her grip around her boy.

Picard, smiling a little, walked by the reunion and dropped into his seat. "Status, Number One?"

"En route to Thesallis II, sir. Warp factor three," said Riker crisply.

"I've heard good reports." Dr. Crusher rubbed her son's back briskly and they stepped back slightly.

"I've tried not to let you down." He nodded, his voice hoarse.

"Communication coming in from Tiberion relay," grumbled Worf.

"On main viewer. Mr. Crusher?" Picard gazed expectantly at his youngest officer. Wes stuck out his chin and nodded. "Return to your post, Ensign. Doctor, please be seated."

Both moved quickly as a darkly handsome face appeared on the main screen.

"Lt. Commander Jan Harlow, Starfleet Intelligence. I'm sorry to interrupt your mission, Captain, but the Enterprise has been diverted to the Ninth Quadrant," he announced.

"Oh?" Picard raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Helm. Adjust course, 425 mark 89," said Riker quietly.

"Aye, sir. 425 mark 89," nodded Wes.

"Merchant vessels have been disappearing from the subspace channels for some months now," explained Harlow. "We sent the Birmingham to investigate. They are now overdue for their routine status check." He looked harassed. "Enterprise is the closest available vessel. You are simply to investigate and report back. A full briefing is encoded with this transmission."

"Confirmed," said Data.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Enterprise out," said Picard tersely.

"I've received details of our destination." Riker studied his work board. "The Quadrille system, sir. On the edge of Alegan space."

"ETA?" asked Picard.

"Fourteen hours and eleven minutes at present speed," supplied Wes.

"Maintain course and speed, Mr. Data. Please prepare a full briefing to be presented in the Conference Lounge in three hours."

"Aye, sir," said Data. Then he hesitated and turned in his seat. "Dr. Crusher?"

"Yes, Data?"

"Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Data." She nodded and smiled.

"Data and Dr. Pulaski did not always see eye to eye, Beverly," smiled Deanna.

Data turned again. "That is not my reason for welcoming Dr. Crusher's return, Counselor," he said in mild reproof. "Dr. Pulaski's attitude towards me was... stimulating." He considered and evidently thought it necessary to repeat the sentiment. "I am pleased to see you again, Doctor."

"Thank you, Data - and I, you."

Data nodded, satisfied, and returned to his work.

"Permission to leave the bridge, sir?" Beverly asked, still smiling.

Picard nodded and waved his hand airily, his eyes on the star-streaked viewscreen. Deanna hid her smile as Beverly left. The Betazoid could feel a slight relaxing of the Captain's usual demeanour and was glad. As Dr. Crusher resumed what felt like her natural place aboard the ship, Deanna reflected that Picard might appear to be as implacable and indestructible as a monolith, but it would do no harm for the sunshine of Beverly Crusher's smile to warm the cladding on his heart.



TWO AS ONE

We need a spaceship
If we are to be sure
We dare not ask them
Should they say no

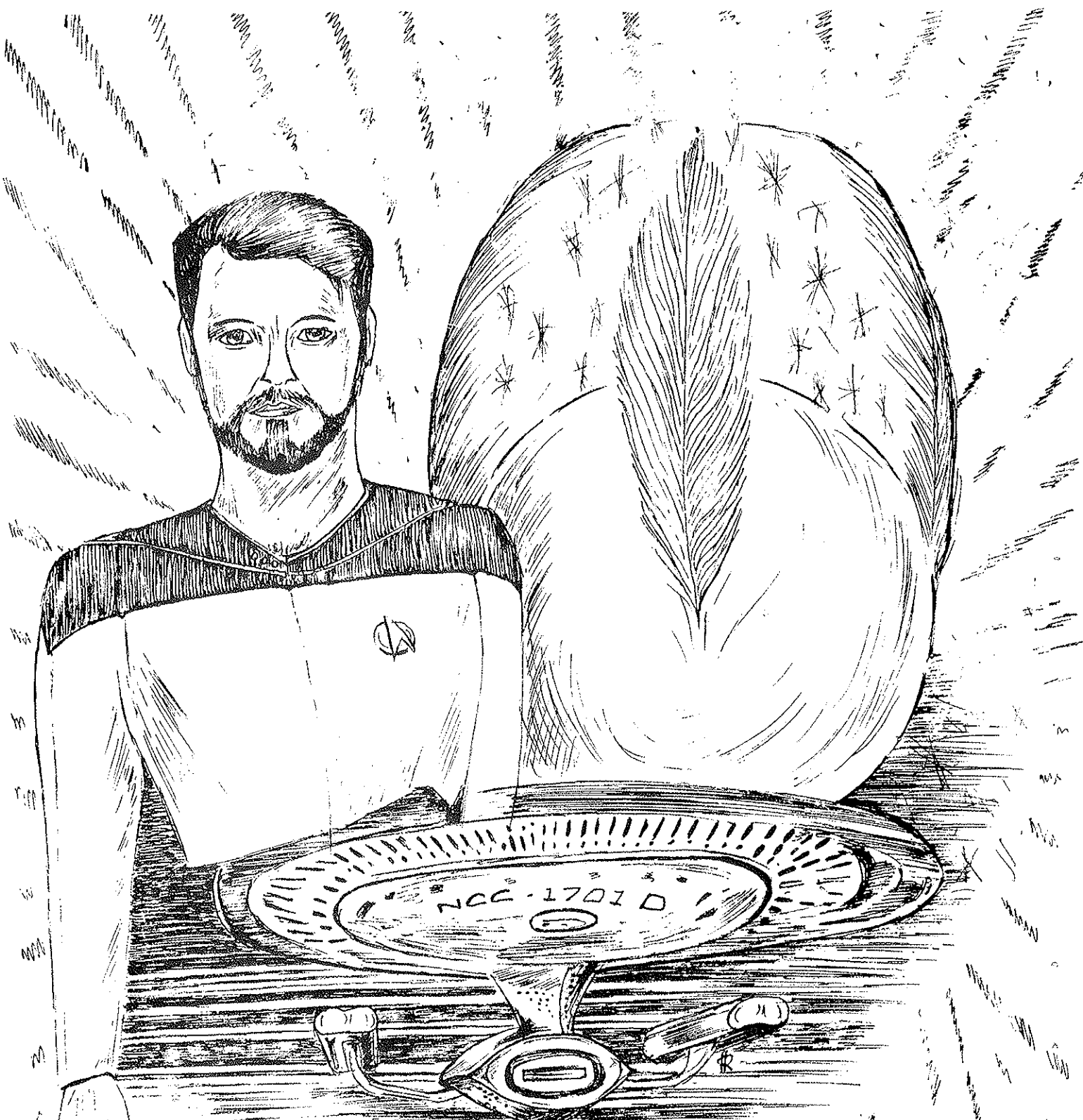
With a computer vast
Of completing our task
To lend us one
We're completely undone.

The Enterprise is coming
We'll simply take it
To save our people
Even should they imprison us

To this space dock
Now no more talk.
We'll do what we must
Till we turn to dust.

Helen Connor





C'est La Q.

By **ELENA BONO**

C'EST LA Q

by

Elena Bond

PART 1

The strange, whining sound filled the Enterprise, rising in pitch and volume until it was uncomfortable to the bridge personnel. Captain Jean-Luc Picard was no stranger to the sound; he had heard it several times before on his bridge. The sound always seemed to accompany the arrival of the entity known as Q, and, if past encounters were anything to go by, Jean-Luc thought to himself he would be more than happy to serve out the rest of his career without ever hearing that sound again.

Suddenly a being appeared on the bridge of the Enterprise as the whining subsided - a being that took the appearance of a bright, shining translucent sphere from which emerged what seemed like three long straight feather-like projections. It hovered, suspended in mid-air, then floated across the bridge. This was the entity's true appearance. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the strange being disappeared and in its place stood a young woman. Her long dark hair cascaded in waves and curls down to well below her waist and her piercing green eyes looked out across the bridge from an exquisitely beautiful face. She was dressed in a long shimmering red dress which clung to her even more perfect body, and through it one could see she was lithe, athletic and very well built. She immediately caught sight of William T. Riker, who had been watching her since she had appeared on the bridge, unable to take his eyes off her. Was it the bright aura which seemed to glow extensively around the woman that held him so transfixed? The First Officer had travelled a thousand solar systems or more in his career, but she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, in many ways a mirror image matching his own extreme good looks. Although physically quite different, for a moment she reminded him of Minuet.

Picard on the other hand was taken totally by surprise. He had never seen a female member of the Continuum before, nor indeed had he known if they even existed. *Could this be the old Q we know and love so much, who has merely taken this form to see how much trouble he can cause this time?* he found himself asking.

"As you would find my true appearance rather difficult to communicate with, I have taken this form to make things easier for you," the entity said, as if echoing some of the questions now going through Picard's mind.

"What are you doing on my bridge?" he asked.

"I decided I wanted to have a little fun. I thought Humans might provide the best entertainment. You see, word travels quickly though the Continuum. I have heard, on good authority, you are one of the most... shall we say *interesting* species in the galaxy. And well, I just had to verify the truth of this," the entity continued.

Picard had heard all this before, or at least words to the same effect, and he was beginning not to like it.

"Tell me, do you also go around hurting people? Is that your idea of fun and entertainment?" he asked. "How do I know you are even real? For all I know you could be just the old Q in female form this time."

"Oh, I am sorry you have such a low opinion of the Q Continuum, Picard. Granted some of us can go a little far at times. But you should not judge us all by the conduct of one individual member," the Q entity replied.

"I'm very glad to hear that," Jean-Luc retorted in a rather sarcastic tone. "But all the same I would rather reserve judgement until I see proof of your actions." Picard could not hide his deep distrust, not to mention dislike, of Q entities; with the amount of power they had at their disposal, the temptation to misbehave would be overwhelming.

"No, I am not 'the same old Q' as you put it, Picard. He belongs to the rowdier, altogether more unruly part of the Continuum. I am rather more subdued, meaning I would never go so far as to deliberately hurt people, as you put it. But that does not mean I still can't get the better of you, especially those of you lacking a sense of humour. Take note of that, Picard."

The alien was getting on Jean-Luc's nerves. The way she had appeared unannounced and uninvited on his bridge, her habit of calling him Picard. The being now looked through Picard, ignoring him as if he was not really there. She was looking straight at Will Riker, whom she addressed as she spoke.

"I am as real as you want me to be, as real as any of you. And anything is possible, for the right one of you. You must be the lovely Captain Riker. I've heard so much about you."

William Riker was virtually blushing with embarrassment. "Commander Riker," he corrected. "I'm not Captain Riker. Captain Picard is in command of the Enterprise. As for calling me lovely, well, you'll just have to wait until you know me better. You might still change your opinion of me," he added with a smile.

"Oh, I don't think so, Commander. If you're not Captain Riker, I think you ought to be. You deserve to be."

"And what makes you think I want to be Captain Riker? As a matter of fact I have already turned down the opportunity once or twice. I'm perfectly happy as I am. Nothing gives me more pleasure than being First Officer on the Enterprise. By the way, in future you can call me Will," he continued, smiling into her big green eyes.

Deanna Troi, who was standing to the left of Captain Picard, looked at Riker disapprovingly.

"Do I note a look of disapproval, Counselor?" Riker was quick to note her resentment.

"Oh no, of course not, Commander." Deanna was equally quick to dispel any negative impression she may have given him.

Jean-Luc Picard had had about enough. "Number One, before my bridge turns into a mutual appreciation society for Starfleet First Officers and strange aliens, I would prefer it if the Q entity left the way it came."



Will Riker was far from happy at the off-handed manner in which Captain Picard was handling the situation. If anything he was putting the ship in danger by inviting retaliation from the Q entity.

"Captain, don't you think you are being rather hard? Why, you've hardly given her a chance at all. The Enterprise has never come into contact with a female Q entity before," he said forcefully.

Riker was prepared to give the entity the benefit of the doubt; that's what space exploration was all about, and it was the reason he had joined Starfleet. He could handle the Q Continuum. Besides he wanted to see more, especially where such a beautiful woman was concerned.

"She's a very beautiful woman, Captain," he added.

The Q entity was obviously pleased at Will Riker's unashamed flattery.

"Number One, I seem to recall that the being that appeared on the bridge could be described as little more than a sphere with three feathers," Picard stated in his usual serious tones. "That is the entity's true appearance, she told us so herself. What you now see, Commander, is nothing more than an illusion."

For the Q entity, this was about the last straw. A ball with three feathers? Was this the way this Captain Picard had described her? Now he would see, this Human, how real or much of an illusion she was. In fact, the woman was real enough; the Q entity had restructured from the spherical being into the woman she now was. Given the way the Continuum could handle matter and energy they were capable of doing virtually anything.

Lady Q was looking straight at Picard now. "I know what you have always wanted most. Your most secret desire."

In the next instant, not only did Jean-Luc Picard grow hair but it appeared in every conceivable style in Earth's history, long Jacobean styles that made him look ridiculous in his Starfleet uniform, through to dreadlocks and all manner of short spiky styles, some in appallingly bad taste.

"Tell me, Captain Picard, which one shall I make permanent?" the being continued. "I think it's a choice between dreadlocks and one of the short spiky styles, in different colours perhaps. I think the short coloured style would suit you best."

Jean-Luc stood on the bridge of the Enterprise, a row of blue, red and green spiky hair running across the length of his scalp, trying to pretend nothing had happened.

"Earth. Latter half of the 20th century, I believe, sir. It was called the Mohican style," Data interjected with that look of puzzlement with which he greeted the unexpected, from the science station where he had been watching since the Q entity had appeared on the bridge. "Interesting historical oddity. Lacking somewhat in aesthetics..." His voice trailed off as if realising his candid description might give offence.

Will Riker could feel the smile break out on his handsome features. He managed to remain serious though, all but suppressing

his laughter at the absurdity of his Captain's predicament. *Thank goodness the Q entity has a sense of humour*, he thought, *otherwise the reaction could have been worse*. Nevertheless he did not wish to be seen encouraging what was happening.

"Was anything I said humorous?" Data inquired with that quizzical look.

"No, Mr Data, it was not," Picard replied. He was furious at what had happened.

"Oh, I see."

"You Humans reach for the stars in your spaceships, seeking out contact with other life forms. Yet for all your 24th Century technology, you have yet to find a cure for baldness," Lady Q began.

"No, we may not have found a 'cure' for baldness, as you put it Q, we've just cured the attitude to baldness those of you in the Continuum, for all your pretence of superior evolution, display." Picard's reply was quick. "Now, Q, you will put me back to what I was. You are quite wrong in purporting to know my 'secret desire', as you put it."

Jean-Luc Picard might well have been addressing the wind, for Lady Q was having too much fun at that moment to even think of removing the absurd hairstyle. Now she turned her attention to Data.

"You must be the one called Data?"

"Indeed I am, madam," Data replied in his usual polite self.

"And what is your greatest desire? To be funny?"

"To be Human," Data corrected. "But I do have trouble with their humour at times, madam."

"Well from now on you won't. You will make them laugh beyond your wildest dreams," Lady Q said to him. "Don't you like to try and copy the functions and mannerisms of these Humans?"

"Yes, I have tried to on occasions. I have tried whistling and sneezing. It is not easy, you know." Data's programming was such that he could not help being his usual candid self. Little could he suspect what the Q entity had in mind for him.

"Have you ever tried breaking wind? Letting off?" Lady Q suggested in her most serious tone possible. "These Humans find such things amusing."

"Breaking wind?" Data asked, his yellow eyes even more quizzical than usual. "How can you break the wind? To let off what? This must be one of their figures of speech with which I am not familiar."

"I think she means farting, Data," Geordi La Forge said with a smile from one of the navigation stations.

"Farting. Most interesting." Data pondered Lady Q's suggestion for a moment. "But I fail to see how an escape of air from the backside can be humorous. Besides I do not know if I would be able to manage farting at all, since I am built somewhat

differently from Humans."

"Try," the Q entity urged Data mischievously. "Oh, you will achieve farting all right and have your wildest dream, to be funny."

Data found himself gripped by the energy auras of the Q entity; he was unable to resist doing whatever the Q suggested to him. The android made feeble attempts to fart, but hardly a sound emerged.

"Ah, I will have to ask the computer for all information available on the action of farting and how this can best be achieved."

"You go ahead and do just that. And keep on practising. Like everything these Humans do it requires practice," Lady Q said, wanting to encourage as much disruption as possible.

The sight of Data's weak attempts to fart was too much for William Riker; he could no longer keep up the pretence of looking serious and ended up breaking into fits of uncontrolled laughter. This made Geordi La Forge start laughing too. Soon, following Riker's example, the Enterprise bridge was reduced to uncontrollable laughter, much to the Q entity's delight and amusement.

"Number One!" Picard, still wearing the absurd blue, red and green hairstyle Lady Q had conferred on him, looked at his First Officer in shocked disbelief.

He looked around the laughter-filled bridge in despair. His officers had been reduced to a collection of monkeys by the Q. One had to grant it to her, this much he had to admit to himself. While she had not directly caused harm in the way the spiteful male Q did, she could cause just as much annoyance, disruption and havoc, just as successfully paralysing his bridge.

"Interesting, how the act of farting can cause so much merriment and laughter," Data observed. "I must try this more often."

Data's observations caused another fit of laughter on the part of Riker.

"Commander Riker! Please." Picard was desperate to get back his First Officer's attention. "Unless you plan to give Data a practical demonstration on how it's done."

"I'm sorry, sir." Will Riker tried to look serious again but he was still smiling at the sight of Data. "I don't go in for such things, Captain, therefore, would not be in a position to show Data how it's done."

Riker's remark caused even more laughter on the part of Geordi and the others on the bridge. Under the influence of the Q entity, the more adventurous side of Will Riker's personality, which always lay close beneath the facade of seriousness he had to maintain as First Officer of the Enterprise, was shining through. And when he smiled like that his emerald eyes sparkled as if a thousand suns rose from them. Riker's unearthly good looks were beyond even what Lady Q had imagined when she first boarded the Enterprise, *beyond anything the male Q told me*, she thought to herself. How appropriate the title of Number One was for him.

The lovely First Officer now flashed his eyes at the Q entity,

knowing he could ask her for anything he wanted.

"Q, would you do something for me?" he asked. "Would you restore Captain Picard to how he was? I'm afraid that if you leave him looking like that none of us will be able to function aboard this vessel."

"Oh, you did not really think I would be so cruel as to leave him looking permanently like that?" Q could not resist changing Picard's mohican style hair into a single thin plait at the back of his head that was possibly in even worse taste, before restoring him back to the way he was when he had described her as a ball with three feathers.

Riker turned his attention to Data. "Data, farting will not make you more Human. It's a positively anti-social activity. You will find once the novelty wears off, far from being humorous, people will start avoiding you." He walked up to Data and now whispered in his ear, as he did not want to start everyone laughing again. "Especially if you make a habit of practising in confined spaces, like the turbolift."

Data looked at Riker, his expression one of greater puzzlement than usual. "Thank you, sir, for pointing out the disadvantages of this activity to me," he said.

"Thank you, Number One, for restoring order to the bridge," Picard said, relief flooding him because he was rid of the hideous hairstyle. "Now perhaps you can find a way of persuading Q to leave this ship, since you appear to be the only one who can communicate successfully with her. I seem to recall you have a way with the Continuum, Commander. Why, at one time they even saw you as one of their number and were prepared to admit you to the Continuum."

"That's very true, Captain Picard. We do indeed look upon Commander Riker as if he was one of our number," the Q entity responded. "He is adventurous, forceful, brave, the only one amongst you who would fully grasp a challenge no matter how difficult. Riker was always the one to show such promise."

"Yes, you will find my First Officer... shall we say, very open minded, especially when faced with a new lifeform," Picard replied, for once most relieved not to be in Riker's place. Jean-Luc had no aspirations of being looked upon as potential Q material.

William Riker, in the meantime, was busy taking scans of the planet the Enterprise was orbiting. The sensors showed it looked promising as a possible recreational planet. It was Class M, its climate and atmospheric conditions very similar to Earth, possessing a number of oceans and land masses and no apparently hostile life forms. He was very attracted to the idea of exploring the planet, and after the hardships of the last Away Team he had led he was in need of rest and recreation. As he scanned the planet's surface another idea was forming in his mind: the advantages that would come to him if he could form a symbiotic association with the Q entity. Will Riker had risked his life a thousand times leading Away Teams, and he would face such dangers many times again. So far he had been lucky - a lot of First Officers had not been so fortunate. He himself had nearly been killed on his last mission. He was beginning to get tired of taking risks. If only he had a relationship with the Q; if only her presence would be with him when he faced danger, there for him in his hour of need (especially if she possessed empathic powers) he never need risk his life again in the

execution of his duties. Protected by the powers of the Q Continuum he would be virtually unconquerable. Such a relationship would be impossible with the male Q (and certainly not to Riker's taste); this Q however was a woman and deeply attracted to him. *Such an opportunity is too good to be passed over*, he thought. Will Riker was a man of great determination; once he had made up his mind he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Not that what he had in mind would prove too difficult to put into practice, especially with the opportunity posed by the potential shore-leave planet below. Riker turned to Captain Picard.

"Captain, I would welcome the chance to take a look at that planet we are orbiting. It looks promising as a place for shore-leave. No doubt you'll agree that after our last mission I am due some recreational time. I don't even consider myself fully fit for duty yet."

"You know I would look kindly on any request of yours for such much earned leave, Number One," Picard said with a smile. "You do realise though, Commander, that the Q entity is bound to follow you down to that planet?"

Jean-Luc welcomed the opportunity to get the Q off his ship, even if she would inevitably take his First Officer away for some time.

"Oh, I think I can handle that eventuality," Riker responded with a smile.

"Very well, Number One. You have my permission to take your leave. Take as much time as you need to get fully fit."

PART 2

William Riker was relaxing in his quarters when the Q entity appeared. After a hard day's work he had not felt like using the holodeck or going to the Ten Forward lounge. He still felt very shaken up from his last mission, where he had been badly hurt in a fight pursuing a race of half Human, half feline beings. He felt tired and wanted nothing better than to lie down.

He had been thinking about the woman known as Q, half certain she would come to him in less formal circumstances than when she had appeared on the bridge of the Enterprise. Now here she was, this time dressed in a shimmering gold short dress which showed off her firm well built legs, her long dark hair falling in waves down her back more than ever reminding him of Minuet. Will Riker could not help being taken by her.

"I thought you would come to me like this," he said with a smile that could have lit up the whole galaxy. "I don't suppose there is anything I could get you?"

As if the Q entity had been reading his thoughts, a tall exotic looking glass appeared in his hand. Lady Q was holding another identical glass in her hand.

"Oh, I had quite forgotten. You can make almost anything appear and disappear out of nothing," he said.

"Romulan fire water - or you can make it appear as anything in the galaxy you wish for, Will Riker."

"This will do me fine. The Enterprise is certainly out of Romulan fire water." This had been the exact thought passing through Riker's mind when the glasses had appeared. It was quite evident the Q entity could read minds accurately and had reproduced the exact thought going through his head at the time. *What other powers does she possess?* Riker wondered to himself.

"You are the reason I came to the Enterprise," Lady Q began. "I simply had to see you, had to see for myself if what that rather embarrassing member of the Continuum had said was true. I don't take all that much notice of him; one can't as he is so unreliable. One must take what he says with a large pinch of salt. But the way he went on and on about you, you should have heard him. Why, you could have been one of us. I simply had to see you for myself. This was not something I intended to stand there on the bridge explaining to your Captain Picard."

"Yes, old Q did seem to have a soft spot for me, I remember. He would be beastly to everyone else, but to me he chose to grant the powers of the Continuum. He saw me as virtually one of his own kind. But why me? Why Will Riker? And why your interest in me? Surely you could choose anyone in the galaxy, in the whole universe, if not from within the Continuum?"

William T. Riker had never thought of himself as anything special; this was one of the most strikingly disarming and delightful things about him. For example, he had never thought of himself as being particularly handsome, thus he was always unprepared for the reaction he was forever causing in this department. To the women of a thousand solar systems he had been masculine beauty and virility personified, and he could have had his pick of any of them. Yet when he looked in the mirror he failed to see or understand what all the fuss could be about. The simple truth was that, though he might remain unaware of it, he must surely have been one of the most strikingly handsome men that anyone had ever laid eyes on. Now perhaps the Q entity would bring the message home to him at last.

"Perhaps if anything Will, your almost unreal physical beauty. You are even more handsome than old Q led me to believe. Surely you are aware of your powers?"

Will Riker only smiled at her. He had heard this said of him so many times before since he was about fifteen years old, though he still refused to believe it.

"They call you Number One. I can see why."

"Oh, that's just the way every First Officer in Starfleet is now referred to. It has nothing to do with any particular personal qualities I might possess." This remark had been too much for Riker. He found the observation highly amusing and was openly laughing out loud. "But you think Number One is in some way descriptive of me?"

"Indeed so. They must have had you in mind when they invented that title."

"Still, please call me Will. 'Number One' sounds too formal between us. As to my 'unearthly' good looks, you do realise it must all fade in time. Unlike those of you in the Continuum I will age. I will in time lose my strength and youth. Does this not bother you?"

"Oh, but it does." Lady Q sounded very sad now. "Nothing pains me more, Will Riker. And if you won't join the Continuum, I will at least delay your aging process. You will keep your youth and radiance almost indefinitely. It's the least I can do for you as I can't bear to imagine you changing like that."

"That's enough about me," Will Riker said reassuringly. "Let's hear something about you for a change. That was some performance you gave on the bridge. Why, for a moment I almost feared you would have Captain Picard mooning. Then I would really not have known what to do."

"Mooning? How can one impersonate the moon?" For once it was Lady Q's turn to look puzzled.

"It's an old Earth expression for showing your backside in public," Riker explained.

"Oh, Commander. That is wicked of you. I would never be so cruel to Jean-Luc Picard." The Q entity was laughing mischievously. "If I were to make your Captain Picard moon, in his case one would not be able to tell one end from the other."

"It might at least be the only time we got to see the Captain smile," Riker said, sounding his most mischievous.

"Yes, you really could be one of us. You certainly have the spirit for it and you are adventurous like us." Lady Q had her arms draped around Riker's powerful shoulders and magnificent chest. She was immediately startled by the amount of pain and discomfort she now sensed he was still in as a result of his recent injuries. While not able to feel pain herself, the Q entity was nevertheless a true empath; she was aware of pain or discomfort in others on physical touch. Furthermore she could heal mental or physical injuries through physical contact with her body with no ill effects to herself, something Deanna Troi was not capable of doing.

William Riker now took her in his arms. "Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"You did not tell me you were hurt, Will. You are so brave to carry on your duties with so much discomfort."

"It's not a question of being brave, but of having no other choice. As First Officer of the Enterprise, I am as responsible for the running of the ship as Captain Picard. Sometimes I just have to carry on regardless of my own needs. Besides, there is little I can do about the pain but wait for time to heal my injuries fully. Unless, that is, there is something you can do about them."

Will Riker had never looked more handsome than now as he lay in the Q entity's arms offering her his exquisite lips. She kissed his lips long and lingeringly, urgently, as if there was no tomorrow.

"I love you, Will," she finally whispered when she could bear to be parted from him. "And yes, there is something I can do, if you lie in my arms for long enough. Even for me, it will take some time as I can see you were quite badly hurt."

She kissed him again, even more longingly this time. *This was indeed the most pleasurable way imaginable to be healed*, Riker thought to himself. Soon he began to realise the pain was easing away and beginning to disappear where the Q entity was holding him.

"This is something your Deanna Troi could never do for you." Lady Q's statement caught Will Riker by surprise as nothing could have been farther from his mind at that moment than Counselor Troi.

"There is nothing between me and Counselor Troi," he said. "There has not been for a long time now. Especially since she planned to marry someone else without even so much as telling me about it. She had never told me in all the time we were together that she had been betrothed to another. You can imagine how upset and hurt I was when I found out."

"I am sorry to hear this, Will. I did not know."

The truth between Riker and Deanna Troi was that he had always found her intense clinging emotions, her dependency on him, her feminine maternal longings, so clogging. She was choking him and he saw no other way out of the situation but to leave her without even saying goodbye. Will Riker had made a mistake in getting involved with Deanna in the first place; he had been taken in by her considerable physical beauty - he always was with women, especially if they had the dark looks he loved so much. He never stopped to consider the woman beneath. Had he done so with Deanna, he would have realised she was not for him. Will Riker had no yearning for domesticity, above all he never wanted to have children; he would never settle down or allow himself to be tamed, which he saw as a sign of weakness in a man. Once he had got to know Deanna there was nothing left for him but the irresistible urge to run away, to free himself of her. It had been best the way he had done it, to leave her without explanations, for Will Riker was loath to hurt any woman, especially one who loved him so, as attempts to explain invariably do. Troi's recent involvement with Dr. Wyatt was merely the excuse he now used to justify how he had always felt, which he would still rather keep to himself. With the Q entity Riker would have no such problems, she was so different from Deanna. She was too independent and self-sufficient to want to cling to him. She would allow him the freedom to pursue his career in Starfleet, yet they could still see each other when he was on leave or when he was in danger. *Especially when I was in danger*, thought Riker. She had so much to offer him, more so than any other woman he had ever had before. He had never before felt so invigorated and refreshed in any woman's arms; it was as if she put new life and strength in his body with each embrace and kiss. And she had the dark sultry beauty he admired so much.

"Would you always do this for me after a hard mission?" he asked.

"I would do something before you got hurt like that again. I would never want you to suffer like that again."

This was just the type of relationship Will Riker had been hoping for and his joy was plain for her to see. This time it was his mouth that caught hers and all talk between them was over.

Counselor Deanna Troi was waiting for Will Riker the next day. She caught up with him as he boarded the turbolift on his way to the bridge. Deanna was meaning to ask him about his plans to explore the planet below, but she especially wanted to inquire about his intentions regarding the Q entity.

"Commander Riker - Will, if I may still call you Will?" For

once Deanna hesitated as if lost for words. "Are you seriously planning to beam down to that planet on your own, except for the company of that Q thing?"

"Counselor, if we must discuss this, may I suggest one of the Ready Rooms? I hardly think the turbolift is the place to discuss my personal affairs, with people constantly going up and down."

Will Riker would have much preferred not to have to discuss what he did when he was off duty on shore-leave with Deanna Troi at all. *Will I have to go through the rest of my career on the Enterprise discussing my private life with her?* he wondered to himself. As far as he was concerned it was over between them. Deanna on the other hand harboured private thoughts that things might be otherwise between them some day in the future.

"Will, that thing, whatever she is, is not Human." Deanna Troi started on Riker as soon as she was left alone with him.

Coming from the half Betazoid, Troi's statement could not have been more extraordinary, Riker thought, and he was quick to point this out to her, inquiring whether perhaps she was, even if only subconsciously, motivated by jealousy.

"What I meant, Will, is that she is not even a humanoid lifeform." Deanna stood her ground though beginning to realise her argument was shaky and Riker was not easily swayed once he had made up his mind. "At least we Betazoids are humanoid in form and I am half Human."

This argument would hardly hold sway with adventurous Riker, who had always been attracted to the call of the unknown.

"Don't tell me, Deanna, you are beginning to sound like the Captain. Soon you will start talking about a ball and three feathers. Really, I expected more from you. Of all people I thought you at least would understand." Will Riker's mind went back to the previous night he and the Q entity had been together. She had seemed real enough to him, more real perhaps than any other woman he had ever been with. And the effect she had had on him was real enough; he had never felt as good in a long time. Nothing could be further away from his experience than the idea that he had been with a glowing ball of energy.

"Counselor, is there any good reason for me to question my perception of the Q entity? Did you sense anything from her when she was on the bridge that might put me in any danger?"

"No, Will, I did not sense anything like that. On the contrary, what I sensed were positively warm feelings towards you. I would say the entity was in love with you." Deanna Troi was smiling now. She could not betray her Betazoid nature for total honesty in what she had felt, even though it went against her own feelings for William Riker. "What's more, I sensed the entity is a true empath; she possesses powers I could not begin to understand, let alone compare with. And Will, she appears to be perfect for you."

There was now sadness in Deanna's voice. Her last remark gave away her own feelings. It was something Will Riker had hoped he would not have to hear. Her dark eyes looked into Riker's. "Will," she asked, "do you love her?"

It was the question Will Riker had hoped she would not ask him. "Yes, Deanna, I'm afraid I do. Don't ask me to explain, I just do. I was in a lot of pain. I have been, lately, and she made me feel better."

"It is as I thought. You are no longer my imzadi."

"Deanna, I seem to recall that not so long ago you planned to marry Dr. Wyatt. In fact you would have married him had he not fallen in love with another woman. Had you done so you would not even be here now. You did not even tell me about him; in all the time we were close you forgot to mention you were betrothed to him. Believe me, Deanna, I did not feel much like your imzadi when the first I heard about your plans with this Wyatt was from Captain Picard."

Riker wanted to make Troi realise he no longer meant all that much to her anyway, and had not in fact done so for a long time now.

"I am sorry, Will. I really am," she replied. "You are right. I should not have questioned you like that, especially after what I did. You never questioned me about Wyatt, though I realise it must have hurt you so."

"It's all right, Deanna," Riker tried to sound reassuring. "Let's say we won't mention it to each other again,"

The planet proved to be a sparsely populated world of large tropical forests leading to miles of deserted beaches, many with coral reefs and secluded lagoons. Riker chose to beam down to an area where the forest thinned out towards the beaches. The planet's twin suns were beginning to rise above the cover of the trees and giant ferns, making the sky appear in all the colours of the rainbow, a bewitching sight to behold. Above the giant ferns which made the forest look something like the way Earth might have done during the carboniferous period, hundreds of multi-coloured birds flew across the sky, filling the air with their chatter and song. The climate was near perfect. It was indeed a world of extraordinary beauty. Will Riker had chosen to beam down to a part of the planet that was largely uninhabited for he wanted to spend some time alone. Not that he would have much chance of solitude, for the Q entity had come down to the planet close behind him. The planet's twin suns had now risen high in the sky.

"Of all the worlds I have been to this must surely be one of the most beautiful," Riker said to the Q entity, feeling this was exactly why he had chosen to join Starfleet. It was sights like this he had spent all his life dreaming that he would one day see.

"Ah, you wait and see what happens at night when all eight moons of this world come out, Will. It's a world with virtually no period of darkness," Lady Q replied. "But can it compare to the sonic skies of Annubis, the third planet in the Sirius system, where the heavens sing? That system also has twin suns, and with Annubis' twelve moons, it is a world with no darkness."

"As part of the Q Continuum you must spend a lot of your time seeking out worlds like these." Will Riker was half envious of the Q entity's ability to seek out such worlds, when a lot of the worlds he had had to go to were far from this loveliness, indeed had been the exact opposite, worlds of darkness and danger where evil had

awaited him.

"Yet all the beauty of such worlds can't compare with the beauty of your eyes or your strong body, Will Riker," Lady Q replied looking into Riker's dazzling emerald eyes. "And that's why after seeing all those worlds and more I chose to come to the Enterprise. Why, I would even leave the Continuum, become Human like you, Will, just to stay with you."

"You must not even think so," Will Riker reacted, not a little alarmed. "To become more Human is to become mortal. It's to know pain, unhappiness, disease, aging and finally death. I'm sure your friend in the Continuum, old Q, told you this, and it's one matter on which I'd agree with his judgement. I can't understand why anyone would willingly choose to become Human who was not already so. If I was like you I would certainly not be thinking of becoming Human. Why, if it was not for my duty to the Enterprise and my loyalty to Starfleet I *would* join the Continuum myself. I was very tempted to once, when old Q offered me this. And besides, I prefer you as the glowing ball of energy with the three feather-like things everyone keeps going on at me about. You certainly don't have to become Human to be with me, at least, some of the time. I do get periods of time off from my duties with the Enterprise."

This made Lady Q smile. "Who knows, you might find yourself in the Continuum yet, Will Riker, when your career in Starfleet and your duties with the Enterprise end."

That was not a bad way to end his days, thought Riker. To escape old age or possibly the crippling accidents that befall so many Starfleet personnel and become immortal with her. For, aesthetic considerations apart, the Q Continuum had no need of the skies of this planet or the healing sonic skies of Annubis; the Q could create their own sonic fields for healing purposes and much more if necessary. Yet for some unfathomable reason, could it be from loneliness, perhaps, or disappointment with her fellow Q, she had a need for him?

"Will, would you mind wearing something a little more adventurous for me?" she asked.

Riker was not, in fact, wearing the uniform of a command officer in Starfleet, as he was on leave. He was casually dressed in jeans and a matching blue shirt. He did look somewhat dull, obviously too dull for Lady Q's somewhat exotic tastes.

"For you, I'll wear anything you wish." He reached out and put his arm around her. Again he felt the strange energising feeling throughout his body he had felt the last time she touched him. "Why, on Rigel IV I wore nothing but green and blue feathers."

"Oh, I was not exactly thinking of having you in nothing but feathers, Will." She smiled wickedly at Riker. "Though I can quite imagine you in green and blue feathers - they would match the colour of your eyes! You would look becoming in almost anything. I was thinking more of something like *this*."

In place of his drab outfit, Riker found himself wearing a silk tunic and matching trousers in turquoise blue. The turquoise complemented perfectly the blue-green of his eyes, while the tunic was unbuttoned down to the waist showing off his beautifully muscled body. It felt remarkably comfortable and was much more in keeping with the planet's near tropical climate than his previous attire.

"The colour of this outfit is made to enhance the colour of your eyes, Will. And I can appear as anything you wish, including that glowing ball of energy."

"Oh, no, please not the glowing ball, not now. Stay as you are. You are just perfect the way you are, just perfect for me."

Will Riker reached out and kissed her once more. She reminded him of someone else, someone from long ago somewhere in his memory, of his long lost holodeck-love Minuet, though she was a thousand times more bewitching. More significantly, while Minuet had been a computer generated fantasy, this woman was real.

"I have something for you, Will. A small token of my feelings for you." She held out a ring to him. Its alien metal glowed, giving off what seemed like a strange energy, while its sapphire and emerald-like blue and green stones, which alternated all round the ring like an old fashioned eternity ring, caught the light from the planet's twin suns, splitting the rays into pink and orange.

Will Riker took the ring. "It's so beautiful!" he exclaimed. "I will treasure it always. I mean to keep it with me always. It will remind me of you, especially when I face unknown dangers."

"Oh, it will do much more than just remind you of me. It will be a permanent link between us. For I know you must leave me soon, Will Riker. You are young and still have your whole life and career ahead of you. But through the ring I will always know where you are; it's as if I will always be with you. I will always help you. You need never face danger, pain or death again, my Will. The ring also possesses healing powers so that it will be that much harder for you to be hurt in the first place."

"Thank you. And I don't have to leave you just so soon," he said, stroking the ring's blue and green stones. This was the rare privilege William Riker had been hoping for, now he had his wish come true. "If only I could give you as much in return."

"Oh, but you have, my Will. Your love, your beauty. Yourself." Her lips found his again and they were lost in each other's arms.

Will Riker flourished under the twin suns and eight moons of the primaeval planet, nurtured and sustained by the love of the Q entity. The planet was abundantly rich in food and natural resources, the seas teeming with fish and the air with flocks of birds, while in the forests grew all manner of exotic fruits and vegetation. The Q entity could provide for Riker's every need. But she would not dream of depriving him of the pleasure of constructing a primitive but effective harpoon or bow and arrow and using it to catch fish or birds, which were then roasted over an open wood fire. This was Riker's favourite method of obtaining fresh food and something he always enjoyed whenever he had the chance, for he had never become wholly used to the computer processed food on board the Enterprise. He was in need of good fresh food if he was to get over his injuries. The Q entity, however, would still provide him with luxuries which were not so readily available on the planet.

When she held him the Q entity was surprised to discover how many times in the past Will Riker must have suffered serious physical injuries. There was no overt external signs of this past

abuse on the lovely body - *thank goodness*, she thought. But she could see inside when they were together to the remains of broken bones, torn muscles and scars from internal injuries, some of which had not healed cleanly and which had left him holding on to a lot of pain. What manner of evil entities could have abused such a beautiful body like that, wasting his strength so? If she had been able to she would have been crying now at his suffering. Instead she set to work healing his damaged flesh with her body. She realised quickly that unlike those in the Continuum, Humans were rather limited in their ability to regenerate lost cells; they scarred instead of growing new tissues to replace those lost through disease or injury. Now, using her powers, she would change the scarred tissues in his body into new flesh, taking away the memory and pain of his suffering. Even for her it was hard going but it was all she could do for the man she loved. From deep inside herself she summoned the strength to heal him. For Will Riker it was new life and youth he had found in her arms; no wonder he clung to her and loved her so. His body soon took on a former, stronger look, making him appear even more attractive than usual. His powerful body had been made for love not pain and abuse, and he always thrived and felt better when there was plenty of love available to him. He was too much of a man to be happy without a woman for long. This was something this woman realised and understood. She would always keep him happy. That was what made her so perfect for him, more so than any other woman he had known before, and she was so beautiful too.

And that was why when it became time for him to return to the Enterprise, Will Riker found it so hard to leave her, although he knew he would not be leaving her forever. On the contrary, this was just the beginning. They would keep in touch, he knew, and they would meet again and again in the future. It was as close as he would ever get to forming a permanent attachment with any woman. Still, while he had always in the past been more than happy sometimes with the excuse to leave his other loves, on many occasions opting to disappear without even saying goodbye, (oh how he hated to have to say goodbye), this time he was filled with sadness.

If only things had been different, had my life been different and I were able to have stayed with her in the Continuum for ever, he thought to himself.

Now he watched her change into the ball of energy before watching her disappear completely. Perhaps one day it might be possible for him to stay with her. Who knew what the future would bring to him? He had kissed the glowing ball before it disappeared and felt its energy bathing his body, renewing his strength, perhaps realising for the first time her wholly alien nature, the totally alien nature of the Q Continuum. Still, he cared little for the differences between them. He loved her and his body just wanted to cling to her.

"You're looking extraordinarily well, Number One," Captain Jean-Luc Picard greeted his First Officer when he returned to work at his command post on the bridge. "I take it your leave was to your liking. Conditions on that planet were good for you?"

"Oh it was great, Captain. Best leave I've ever had. Do you know, I'm thinking of retiring to that planet one day when my career in Starfleet is finished." Will Riker was beaming a smile that lit

up the whole bridge as he remembered the experience. As almost an afterthought he added, "The planet is beautiful beyond belief. You should see its twin suns rise and set. Oh, and the nights when all eight moons come out. And there are the most beautiful forests and coral beaches and the air is always full of the song of birds. There is plenty of fresh food, and... Oh, I could go on forever."

"Seems like I must pay this world a visit sometime, Number One." Picard looked at his First Officer with quizzical eyes. For once Will Riker would agree with his Captain's personally beaming down to a planet.

At night he lay alone in his cabin thinking. It was almost as if Will Riker could see her watching over him, caring for him, always with him and for once he felt safe. On his work table a few feet away the blue and green stones of the alien ring gave out an eerie light in the darkness of the room. The ring had originally come from the planet Annubis in the Sirius system. It had been a gift from Annubis' ruler Annuka to the Q entity. Unknown to William Riker he had been given one of the Q Continuum's most priceless possessions, a key to unlocking the powers of the Q itself. While he remained in possession of the ring, which he valued so much for its beauty and the relationship it represented, he would always be safe.



REGRETS

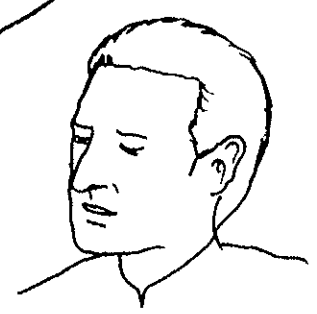
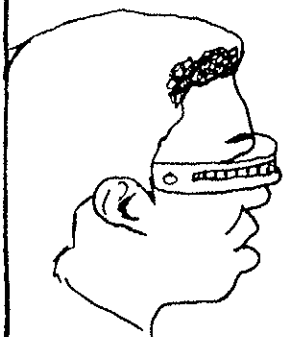
I shall return to the planet Mordan,
Face the thing that I have done;
But I shall return as a whole man,
Not a weak and ailing one.
I shall correct the wrong I did there,
Lessen the guilt I bear,
My error I shall not repeat;
To prevent death is my only care.
I feel the new strength within me;
I am now as I used to be.
By retaining the wisdom of old age
I shall set the hostages free.

No, this is not what I'd hoped for;
Each cell within me is at war.
Still shall I do all I have stated
And suffer what's in store.
Karnas, this young man's really me -
I see you do not believe.
Well, reap your vengeance as you wish,
But set the hostages free.





'POPPET' POPRPO'LTRRPTALK



WATCH OUT FOR THE . . .

(POPPET TALES I)

by

Lorraine Goodison

Acting Ensign Wesley Crusher had encountered better days. He'd had worse too, but right now he could not recall anything worse than the rampaging headache and throbbing neck pains his body was presently enduring. Maybe if he lay there long enough, he'd think of something.

The hush of a door opening and a low murmur of voices made little impression on his consciousness, such as it was, until a large unmistakable head loomed into his circle of vision.

Wesley managed to croak, "Hello, Lt. Worf," before his throat closed up entirely.

The Klingon gazed with some concern at the young Human. "How are you?"

"I've been better," Wesley answered with a 'don't worry about me' smile.

"Hmmm." Worf cast a cursory glance at the diagnostic panel. "The Doctor tells me you are resting comfortably and should be released tomorrow."

Wesley began to shrug but thought better of it; it hurt too damn much. "She's the expert."

His comment was met by one of Worf's long considering silences, which was broken by the observation, "I, too, am an expert. I expected better of you. I thought I had taught you the correct moves."

"You did, but I was caught off-guard."

The excuse held no water with the burly Klingon. "You should know the correct procedures to deal with non-humanoid opponents. I have taken you through them many times."

"But you don't have a tail!"

"That is a mere detail."

Wesley gave Worf a close stare, wondering if he'd made that pun deliberately. Knowing Worf, it was better not to ask.

A slight commotion and mumble of voices announced the arrival of another visitor to Sickbay. Wesley groaned softly, while Worf turned his attention to the incomer.

Ensign Poprpo'ltrrptaik - or Poppet as she was more familiarly

known - was a member of the Mijbilem, a race of sea otters rarely seen outwith their home system. Starfleet's Rapid Integration Programme had encouraged more outer-edge systems to join up. A series of incentives had been designed to catch the brightest students, nine of whom had made it to the glorious Starfleet. Poppet was one of the most recent, and something of a unique personage.

Watching her approach, Worf was reminded of her first appearance on the Enterprise. Although he familiarised himself with personal details of all new recruits, Poppet's files had not completely prepared him for the impact of her presence.

She materialized on the transporter platform with a plethora of items attached to her tunic-cum-harness, her four foot long tail tucked under her arm to keep it in the transporter field, a child-like look of wonder on her face... and a large furry toy clutched in one hand.

Worf took a long hard look at the offending object. "Ensign - we do not allow Security Officers to carry toys."

Poppet's whiskered face twitched in consternation. "It's not a toy," she assured him in husky tones. "It's a rrrikmurr." Since Worf looked singularly unimpressed, Poppet continued. "It's from my clan; it's got all their scents and my home and friends and... Please sniff!"

Worf found the furry object thrust under his nose and the distinctive smells made his olfactory senses go into hyperdrive. He fixed Poppet with a hard stare designed to make her realise her place. The only problem was, her head kept bobbing and weaving and he could not make total eye contact.

"Stand still!" he barked, only to discover that 'still' to a Mijbilem was an alien concept. Worf gave it up as a bad idea and handed the newest recruit on to a junior officer.

That incident fresh in his mind, Worf felt a surge of impatience as Poppet approached. The Mijbilem was unlike anything Worf had yet encountered and he had to remind himself of her excellent, if short, service record as she greeted him with her characteristic head-bobbing motion.

"I came to visit Wesley," she explained, intently watching for approval.

Worf nodded slightly, which Poppet interpreted as permission to lean over Wesley, delicate hands patting his bed clothes consolingly. "I'm so sorry I hurt you," she said. "I didn't mean to, really I didn't, but Lt. Worf did say I wasn't supposed to hold back and - "

"'S all right, honest," Wesley interrupted, gagging on her seafood breath.

"Oh, but it isn't. I forgot you Humans haven't tails and can't compensate... Are you all right, Wesley?"

The youth was beginning to turn an interesting shade of green, which prompted Worf to grasp Poppet's arm and guide her away before Wesley disgraced himself.

"He will recover," Worf stated confidently, earning himself an amused glance from Pulaski, hurrying by to attend to the retching over in the corner. "I, however, would not be so easily beaten."

"Don't you think so?" Poppet enquired guilelessly, then, remembering who she spoke to, continued, "That is - of course not, Lieutenant. I'm sure you would be able to defend yourself. Wesley's only young."

Worf shot a heavy-browed look at her. "He has been instructed, but his self-defence technique is not at my level." *Nor ever likely to be*, he added silently.

"I'm sure you could teach me a lot, sir."

"I am sure I could, Ensign," Worf answered, supremely confident. He turned a commanding eye on her. "We will meet in the gym, deck 12, in one hour. I will take you through some advanced defence and attack techniques."

Those words, which had made many a raw ensign quiver in trepidation, merely added fuel to Poppet's somewhat excitable nature and she doddled off, body weaving to and fro.

There can be few more ludicrous sights than a full-grown Klingon being soundly thrashed by an eight-foot, sincerely apologetic, otter. Flying through the air for the fourth time, Worf fervently hoped that no one was around to witness this particular humiliation.

He thudded heavily onto the padded gym floor, a whoosh of breath exiting his lungs. The remainder was rudely expelled by the onslaught of Poppet's considerable weight. She used her smoothly furred tail to push herself up and sat watching the Klingon intently.

"You are hesitating," Worf gruffly admonished as he rolled over to rise.

"But that's what I did to Wesley and he - "

"You will find an adult Klingon a different proposition to a stripling Human boy," Worf growled, missing the 'I will?' look which crossed Poppet's face.

The Security Chief sucked in a deep breath as he readied himself. "Again, but this time do not hesitate."

With a flurry of movements, Worf and Poppet grappled, the attack once again ending with Worf under several stone of otter. This time, however, Worf hit a sensitive spot on Poppet's belly and used her own weight and gravity to lever her off him. He followed through, catching her as she rose.

For a moment they strained with equal strength, then Worf made a sweeping move which caught Poppet off-balance and sent her spinning toward the wall.

Allowing himself a brief moment of congratulation, Worf was unprepared for Poppet's cannon-ball return. Like a rebounding ball, she'd used her tail to bounce off the wall and now hurtled toward Worf in a full-length tackle.

Worf's world turned topsy-turvy as his legs headed for the ceiling. His head walloped the floor just off the mat and something hard clipped the back of his skull. Darkness followed.

There was an aroma of fish, strong and virulent, as if he'd plunged his head into a bucket of cetacean food. Why was there a smell of fish? Was he in a harbour?

"Lieutenant? Lt. Worf? Are you awake? Please speak to me. I didn't mean to hurt you. I only - "

Worf opened his eyes to find Poppet's bewhiskered face mere inches from his nose. Now he understood Wesley's reluctance to let Poppet approach past a certain limit. The stench was overpowering. If he were not a Klingon...

"Now don't worry about a thing, Ensign. He'll be perfectly all right."

The sound of Pulaski's no-nonsense tone combined with clearing vision to make Worf wish he were still unconscious. He was in Sickbay. *He'd been taken to Sickbay...!* His eyes shot daggers at Poppet.

The doctor smiled pleasantly as she shouldered Poppet aside. "How are you feeling, Lieutenant?"

"Fine."

"I thought so. You've got a lump the size of an egg. That must have been some knock."

"I caught him with my tail," Poppet explained helpfully.

"Interesting move," Worf muttered through his teeth.

"He's annoyed," wailed Poppet. "I knew he'd be annoyed... "

"Now don't upset yourself, Ensign," Pulaski told her. She shot a warning glance at Worf. "That sort of thing happens all the time, doesn't it, Lieutenant?"

"Frequently," Worf mumbled. *To others...*

"Especially if you forget about the tail," Wesley piped up from along the ward.

Worf quickly recovered his health, if not his dignity, and left Sickbay as soon as possible. There was no sign of Poppet, so he could only hope that she would keep quiet about the incident. He wondered if the threat of three days intensive training in the gym would be enough to ensure Wesley's silence. Perhaps he should have made it a week.

As his next shift was about to begin, Worf took the lift to the bridge, meeting Captain Picard as he emerged. A tiny frown creased Picard's forehead.

"Lieutenant - is that a bruise?"

Worf straightened, determined not to bring attention to his injury. "Klingons do not bruise."

"Ah." Picard's eyes half-closed into his 'considering' expression. "You forgot to wash, then."

"Klingons do not - "

Worf closed his mouth like a trap, aware of Riker's lips twitching into a smile. With all the considerable dignity he possessed, he nodded and moved to his duty station.

It wasn't easy, being macho.



FOREVER WEeping

It was impossible, I knew -
but I could feel his life
growing inside.

I saw him. And while they
talked of 'unknown aliens'
and 'laboratory study'
I began to love him.

His birth gave me no pain.
Only joy.

I held him in my arms and knew
that I would always love him.
My son, who came to me so quickly -
then left me alone.

I tried to hold on to him,
but he ebbed away and became
a bright light shining,
speaking words of love.

He was gone, taking my heart with him.
And though I laugh and smile
there is a part of me
that will always be

Forever weeping.



Morag Phillips

DOUBLE TROUBLE

by

Lisa Dearnley Davison

The young Commander sighed heavily. He stared at the huddled form of the ensign across the small fire.

I'm glad I decided to stop for the night. Hellena was looking so tired. I don't care if she's the best Science Officer out of the Academy. She's not up to jungle survival, she hasn't been trained in this field yet. Hell, I'm not even sure I can survive, even on my training. I've been at this a hell of a lot longer than she has. Oh, what's the use. She was appointed to me. It seems so long since the crash. Funny how time has no meaning. It's always dark in these trees. It looks so dark out there even now. I think the sun has set, though. The firelight is casting strange shadows, they look a bit like animals. It almost looks like they're staring at us. Stoppit!! That's not going to help. When are you going to get into your thick head that there's nothing on this godforsaken planet? ...There's a mist creeping through those trees. I can see the moonlight in the topmost branches. I'd better not let Hellena sleep too long - if the inside of her cape gets wet, she'll freeze. At least she's sleeping now. ...What was that? Probably nothing. There's nothing, no-one, here at all and it's my fault we've been here... what is it... 3 days? I should have reported back to the Enterprise, but no, I have to play hero and go investigate and look where that's got us. Stuck on some strange planet that seems to be one gigantic forest with communicators that have shorted out... little food and water... and god knows what waiting out there to get us. And she's no help either. She's always giving me the cold shoulder - "Yes, sir", "No, sir". Doesn't she realize I'm trying my hardest to help us survive? No. She'll still hate my guts. And not only that. There's something trying to kill us out there. Can it get any worse?

The small form of the ensign barely moved as she tried to get some rest. Thoughts flitted through her head, denying her the sleep she needed.

Good, grief, doesn't he realise I'm not as fit as him? I suppose its no-one's fault we're stuck here. I should have known. All the signs said there were Romulans here. ...He's pushing me to the limit every day, with hardly any sleep. I don't know if I can keep this up any longer. I'm surprised I haven't collapsed yet. And on top of that we're traipsing through this dark green tangle that's supposed to be a forest. We should be thinking of ways to survive for longer than our protein packs can provide for us. What about water? Have I got to think of everything? He probably thinks I'm lying here happily sleeping away my fears. Ha! What does he know? It's getting colder now. I think it's getting misty. The air feels damp. We should make a shelter. Who knows what the weather's like on this planet? I wish it wasn't so quiet. It's unnerving not hearing any familiar sounds, especially birds. You'd think with all these trees that there would be birds. I wonder what time it is? We should have stayed near the shuttle. They might not

be able to pick us up on their sensors through all these trees. The Romulans might not find us either.

Riker stared mournfully into the firelight.

She doesn't seem to think I can organize anything. Every time I tell her to move she looks at me scornfully. Maybe we should have stayed with the shuttle. It could be weeks before they find us or the shuttle. I suppose she blames me. She's probably right. It was my fault we got blown out of the sky and onto this place. I suppose it's better than dead. We might as well be dead - we'll probably die of dehydration or starvation anyway. No!! We're gonna survive. We've got to survive. Someone has to tell Starfleet that there's hostile beings on this planet. They were firing at us from the trees. My god, they could be out there looking for us! Calm down. It would take them ages to find the shuttle and then us. We wouldn't be that easy to track, surely. What if they did? No. No, they couldn't. They would have found us by now. ...I should really put some more wood on the fire. That small log over there should be enough to keep it going for a while... There, that's better. I'll be able to see anything coming now with that brighter light. I'm beginning to wish we'd gone on a little further. Still can't see very far and it's still too quiet.

Despite the continuing arguments raging through her mind, Hellena could feel sleep about to take over.

I wish we had better phasers than these things. If anything large jumps us we've had it. I'm beginning to feel so tired. What if something attacks us when we're asleep? He'll probably fall asleep on his watch. All we have is that lousy knife and a couple of small hand phasers. Oh well, at least it's something we can use. We'll just have to rely on our feet if anything big attacks us. Maybe we could hunt or set traps or... or... God, I feel so tired..... so tired..... sooo.....

Riker watched the flickering shadows.

Damn, I'm feeling sleepy. ...The light is making some weird shadows on the trees. Makes them look alive. Hey, this planet's got two moons! I never noticed that before. All those stars. I can just see the Enterprise in orbit... I wonder if we'll ever get back. It doesn't help that she hates me! I wonder if I should wake her. Jeez, I can't keep my eyes open. Maybe she doesn't really hate me. Maybe she's really beginning to like me. ...God, what are you thinking? She hates your guts. You're stupid to believe that she could really like you. You're just seeing with your feelings, not a clear head. No! Can't go to sleep now. Got to get up and move.

As Riker leapt up he startled Hellena, making her reach for her phaser.

Christ, the way he jumped up I could have shot him. Stupid idiot doesn't realize the training I've been through. Shame it didn't include this sort of thing. I could have killed him before he even realized I was awake. I wasn't trained for this. It was always strictly reconnaissance. Now what's he complaining about?

"It's too open here, we must move on."

"Aren't you going to sleep, sir?"

"No, we have to keep moving."

God, I wonder what I did now? He hates my guts and yet I'm sure he's trying to prove *something*. Why else would he be driving himself to the limit like this? Idiot's gonna kill himself. Where will I be then? ...God, it's so dark. This stuff we're walking on's so soft and springy, not like that hard dry earth I was lying on before. Oww! Goddammit. Those bloody branches are going to rip my face to shreds. I didn't hate him very much before but if we ever get out of this alive I'm gonna kill him! ...Well, maybe he's not all bad. In fact he's quite handsome. That's more than I can say for some of the other officers on the ship. He's got some brains as well, so that's another plus for him. ...We've still gotta get out of this mess. Before the Romulans find us.

You idiot!! I'm not surprised she hates you. You're driving her into the ground. I'm surprised she hasn't collapsed into a little heap. You really are a stupid..... My god, what's that?

Riker stopped abruptly.

"Listen."

"I can't hear anything."

"Just listen, Hellena."

Its a bit slippy here. And rocky. What was that? That sound - oh god, it sounds... No, it couldn't be. They said it wasn't possible. They couldn't have. That type of genetic engineering isn't possible. *Wasn't* possible. It has to be them. They've actually crossed the neutral zone without us knowing. How could we have missed them? It shouldn't be possible...

"Hellena?" asked a gentle voice. "Are you okay?"

That voice - it sounded so familiar. Riker? What's he doing here? What am I doing here? Where *is* here?

"Shush, Hellena. You stumbled and fell when you heard the howls. I think you've got a slight concussion. No, don't move."

I've got to get up... got to get up... get up.....

Riker stared at the limp form of Hellena, sprawled on the ground.

Oh damn, she's unconscious again. I should have watched where I stopped. It's all my fault. Always my fault. Jeez, I hope she's gonna be okay. Come on, dammit! Come round! ...I'd better take her back into the cover of those trees. There's no blood. That's a good sign. ...If only she would come round. I'd better keep her warm somehow. And we lost the medikit. Dawn's not too far off. She should have come round by then so we should be able to move on a bit. I shouldn't press her so much. It's my fault. I'm supposed to be the one in charge. Maybe I should let her take charge. She's been bugging me about food, fresh meat, water. Oh, why didn't I listen? She's breathing okay. That's a good sign, I suppose. I think she's coming round. All that training I did. I can't remember anything. Ah, at last!

"Oh, good grief, my head. Where are we?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere and you've got a slight concussion."

"Oh! Can I move?"

"You shouldn't, but we need to keep moving."

"Okay, then, let's move. I don't think I want to stay round here."

"First I want to go down that slope and see where those howls were coming from."

"So what's stopping us?"

"I want you to sit here quietly and recover."

"Okay."

"What was that? No fight? I must be hearing things."

"My head hurts too much to go into battle with you right now, so just go before I change my mind."

Hellena lapsed back into silence and watched the disappearing form of Riker as he made his way slowly down the slope.

Maybe I shouldn't have left her. ...She would never have got down this slope. It's steeper than it looks. Damn! That was slippery. I'm sure that's a building over there. Well, maybe not a building, more like a steel wall. If I climb that tree over there I might be able to see over it. What if I'm seen? Oh well, that's a chance I'll have to take.

I should've told him. He has a right to know. What do I do? They never told me how to cope in this type of situation. Should I tell him? I can't. ...I hope Riker is all right. That slope didn't look safe. I noticed he slipped a couple of times. God, where is he? It shouldn't take all this time. Oh no, I don't believe it. The stupid fool has climbed a tree and is in full view of anyone who walks along the ridge. What the hell is he playing at? Why doesn't he just yell, "I'm here!?" It would be a lot safer. ...What was that noise!?

Hellena drew her phaser at the noise that echoed around the forest. Riker, oblivious of the sound, had started back down the tree.

That was a stupid idea in the first place. I couldn't even see over the wall. I suppose I'd better get back to Hellena before she starts to worry. Ouch! Dammit. Stupid tree! It wasn't this hard to climb up. Hey, what was that? ...It sounded like Hellena's phaser.

"Hellena!!!"

They must have seen me in the tree. How could I be so stupid? I can't see her. Dammit, Hellena, where are you? Oh god, no!

"Hellena!!!"

Riker scrambled the last couple of feet up the ridge and ran towards the uniform-clad figure sprawled across the ground in the

clearing. He did not, however, see the crouched form of Hellena by the side of a tree.

Where's the idiot going now? Even I can see that's no Human lying on the ground. The fool is going to get himself shot.

"Riker! Get down before they see you!"

If he doesn't get down he's gonna be dead by the looks of all that laser fire exploding around his feet. I'd better get him.

It is Romulans! They shouldn't be this far inside the neutral zone. And now they've found us. I suppose Hellena is going to blame this on me, too. If we don't get out of here soon they'll surround us and we'll end up in that death camp of theirs or in front of one of their councils across the neutral zone. Either way we'll be as good as dead. And what about that howling? That couldn't have been them. I wonder what they're up to? Why are they here?

I suppose Riker will want to sit here as the Romulans quietly advance on us. Well I'm not going to!

"Look, if we stay here much longer they'll surround us. If we don't move now, we're as good as dead."

"Okay. At the next cease fire we'll head back towards those trees over there."

Well, that was the last thing I expected from Riker. We're actually going to run from them! I can't see us fighting them, though. They'll get us eventually. We can't run forever. Either that or they'll send those mutated creations after us.

I hope Hellena is up to this after that fall. It sounds like there are more of them coming towards us. We're going to have to make a break for it.

"Now!"

I hope to god that Hellena is following me. The trees are further away than I first thought. Thank god. We've finally got cover. I can hear the shots now. Were the trees really that close? It seemed to take them a long time to re-charge their rifles. No time to think, now. We must keep running.

The two figures ran through the trees with the troops thundering behind them. Hellena was starting to tire.

I wish Riker would slow up. We must have at least a mile between us and the Romulans. We should be looking for a place to hide.

"We've got to keep moving. They'll comb this forest until they find us."

"Can't we stop for a minute?"

"Not yet. There's no time."

I suppose he's right. They'll have their beasts out by now. I'd hate to be caught by one of them. I've seen pictures of what they can do.

"If you don't get a move on, they'll find us, and if they find us, well..."

"It's not them I'm worried about."

It's uncanny how he always knows what I seem to be thinking. These trees are endless. There's just nowhere to hide. I can still hear the troops and the beasts.

Riker pounded on through the trees, anxious to put more distance between them and the Romulans.

We've got to keep running. I wonder what Hellena meant. We haven't put enough room between us and them, yet. ...There's probably no escape. Who else could possibly be worse than Romulans? They'll hunt us down like wild animals. If they don't get us, there's no telling what will. Who knows what unseen predators lurk in this forest? None probably. We would have seen them by now. I can't hear the troops any more. I wonder if they've been recalled.

"It sounds like the troops have been recalled."

"I doubt it. More like they've spread out. You realize they won't give up until they find us, don't you?"

"Yes! I'm not that stupid."

"I would never have thought the Romulans would come this far into Federation space."

"Yeah. Well, they're here now and we've got to make sure they don't get us."

"What did you mean when you said it wasn't them you were worried about?"

"There's been rumours that they have been toying with genetic engineering. They showed us pictures in the Academy of what they were trying to do and what the product could do. It wasn't a pretty sight."

"You mean there is something worse out there?"

"If those howls were anything to go by, then yes."

Oh, good grief. Just when we thought we knew how bad bad really was, it suddenly gets worse. Why didn't she tell me sooner? How can we possibly survive now? We've gotta find somewhere to hide. Looks like another ridge coming up. The ground's a lot more rocky round here. Some pretty big boulders. That ridge looks fairly high. What's that? It looks like a cave!

As Riker came to a halt, Hellena sank down onto a broken tree stump, gasping for breath. He shaded his eyes and looked up the side of the sharp, craggy ridge.

"Look up there!"

"I can't see anything."

"I'm sure that's a cave. Behind that outcropping rock over there."

"A cave won't be much good against those death beasts."

"We have to try!"

"Anyway, I don't see any cave. You're probably wrong. Riker! Stop! Wait for me!"

He's at it again. Not a moment's rest and he's off. Who does he think I am? Some sort of super-human? This ridge is steeper than I thought. Now where's he gone?

"Riker?"

Good grief. He was there a second ago. He might be over by those boulders.

"Riker! I wondered where you were."

"It isn't a cave."

"Good. I hate small places."

"We'll just have to keep going until nightfall."

"Until night! Oh well, what will we do then?"

"We'll have to sleep in shifts and hope our phasers will stop them if they find us."

"We'd better get a move on then. Up or down?"

"What?"

"Do we carry on up the ridge or go back down to the bottom?"

"Oh! We'd probably be better off if we carried on up the ridge."

I knew there wasn't a cave there. He wouldn't listen, though, and we've wasted time. If we're not careful the Romulans will be upon us before we can blink.

Riker reached the top of the ridge first and was soon followed by Hellena. They stared across the wind-swept plain.

"Damn! There's absolutely no cover whatsoever."

"Now what do we do, Riker?"

"I have no idea."

"Shall we try and cross the plain?"

"I don't know."

"Should we go back down the ridge, then?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know a lot do you?"

"So why don't *you* make the decision, then? I'm fed up trying to decide whether we go this way or that. Every decision I make could kill us and you never let up. You seem to know more about this situation than I do. Well now it's your turn. You can make the 'life or death' decisions now. I'll depend on you for a change."

"Hey! This isn't exactly a holiday for me either. I've never been in a situation like this."

"For your information I've never been in a position like this either."

"Well if that's your attitude we'll go that way." Hellena pointed across the wide open grassland.

Stupid big-headed pig. He's had 10 years at least out in the field, and he says he doesn't have any experience. Ha! That's a laugh. He would never have made commander if he didn't have experience!

I think I've pushed her too far this time. Why can't she see it my way, the stubborn female? I've gone on numerous space missions, fought one to one combat, played diplomat, but I've never been stranded with no decent weapons on a planet infested with Romulans and some weird mutated animals. The power in our small phasers won't last long against a pack of death beasts. WHAT WAS THAT?

"Did you hear that, Hellena?"

"No. What was it?"

"A sort of low humming noise, I think. Like a... Get down!!!"

Hellena and Riker threw themselves on the ground as a small shuttle passed overhead.

Oh god, they've found us already. I didn't expect them to bring out their own shuttles. Riker must have known what they would do. They'll shoot us down if we stay here. We've got no chance of making it across the plain to the cover of the trees.

"Riker!"

"What?"

"We're gonna have to make a run for the ridge. It's the only chance we've got."

"I'm right behind you."

I hope that was the right decision. I hope we make it before the shuttle makes another pass. It didn't look like a Romulan shuttle. Must be a new prototype. I can hear it coming back. We'll just make it.

Hellena and Riker crouched beside a large, bushy shrub as the shuttle roared overhead.

"That was one of our shuttles!"

"Don't joke, Riker."

"I'm not kidding. That really was one of our shuttles."

"That means they came looking for us!"

"Not if they've come for the Romulans."

"So what?"

"That means a security force and if Worf's leading it it will be shoot first, ask questions later."

"Uh-oh. What was that?"

"Don't tell me that you're hearing things now?"

"I don't know. It sounded like... like... some sort of throaty growl."

"Oh my god. Look down there, Hellena. At the bottom of the ridge. What is that thing?. What are we gonna do?"

"Well, now that we know the shuttle is one of ours, we can try and cross the grassland."

"We've gotta be fast 'cause that thing looks mean. It'll probably tear us to bits when it catches us."

"So let's start running."

I can't believe that Hellena is so cool. We've got to be fast if we're going to make it across the plain before that... that thing catches us. I can hear approaching shuttles. The Captain must have been seriously worried after we lost contact, there's got to be two or three more of 'em at least. That thing must be half way up the ridge by now. I can hear more of them nearby. I can see Worf. Good grief, it looks like he's brought the whole Enterprise with him. God, Hellena is running faster than me. They must know about the Romulans. Why else would Jean-Luc send so many? Must keep running. The beast has reached the top of the ridge. There's a scout ship. They must know we're here, too. There's Romulans breaking cover off to the left. They must have seen us.

"Riker! The second shuttle is setting down at the edge of the plains."

"Keep running. Make for that second shuttle and watch out for phaser fire. There are Romulans on the ridge."

"Riker! I've been hit."

"Dammit. How bad?"

"I can't move my leg."

"I'll just have to carry you, then."

"Riker, save yourself. You've got to give your report about that installation back in the forest. Riker! Put me down!"

"Don't be an idiot. I can't leave you here"

Riker started towards the shuttle.

I can't understand why they don't beam anyone down. I hope we don't get hit by friendly fire. Damn, that was close. They couldn't really send a search party for us. They wouldn't have known where we were. Those animals should've caught us by now. Why don't they use the transporters? I don't believe it. The Romulans are dropping back. Worf's pulling back too! I don't understand. Just a few more yards.

"Worf!"

"Commander. Are you alright?"

"Nothing Doctor Crusher can't handle. Why didn't you beam down?"

"Data calculated your approximate position to the nearest 10 miles and we started a search from there using the sensors. A search on foot in possibly enemy territory would be both dangerous and time consuming - the Captain wanted you found immediately."

"Does the Captain know about the Romulans yet?"

"Not to my knowledge."

They climbed into the shuttle.

"Data?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Have you told the Captain yet about the Romulans?"

"Not yet, sir. Something has been blocking all communications since we arrived."

"Let me know the moment you resume communications with the Enterprise."

"Yes, sir."

The android returned to the communications console.

"With all due respect, Commander Riker, would it not be better to see to the elimination of the enemy?"

"No, Worf. I think we had better wait to see what the Captain has to say about all this. Besides, there's a huge installation back in the forest and they've probably got more fire power than us at the moment. We need the Enterprise for that."

Riker turned as one of the security ensigns brought in Hellena.

Hellena's out cold. Must be a mixture of the head and leg wound. And exhaustion. I knew I pushed her too hard. We never did get the plant samples the Science Department wanted. They can always come back and get them themselves when the place has been

cleared. I'm not coming back. Least not if I can help it.

The shuttle took off gently.

"Commander, I have the Captain on the viewer."

"Thanks, Data. Sir, I wish to make a report on the Romulan activity on this planet."

"No need, Number One."

"Sir?"

"Starfleet had us come here to search this sector for such possibilities."

"You knew they were here?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell us? We nearly died out there!"

"Starfleet would not allow it. This mission was top secret, on a purely need-to-know basis. You were to pilot the shuttle to places known only to Lt. Gabel for signs that there were Romulans. It is unfortunate that they discovered you before you had a chance to leave."

"Wait a minute, sir. Who exactly is Lt. Gabel?"

"Ah, of course she couldn't tell you that. That is, Ensign Hellena Elliot is really Lt. Katrina Gabel."

"You knew everything?"

"No. Not until I was briefed yesterday. All I knew was that an experienced officer was to escort a member of the science team down to the planet to collect items from the surface which I presumed to be plant samples."

"So you knew nothing?"

"No. And I expect your full report when you return."

"Yes, Captain."

He expects a full report! He knows more about this mission than I do and he expects a full report? Ha! At least we're getting back in one piece. I hope Hellena's okay. What am I saying? She's the one that got us into this mess! Well, perhaps I can't blame all this on her. It was partially my fault. Still, we still have a problem. What are we going to do with the Romulans? And those things? I suppose that's up to Starfleet. Just so long as they don't expect me to go back. I think she's coming round.

"Ah, I see we made it to the shuttle, then."

"Nice of you to join us, Lieutenant."

"Hey! Don't give me the cold shoulder! This mission was on a strictly need-to-know only basis. And before you butt in, Starfleet didn't think the pilot of the shuttle needed to know. Oh no, don't give me that look, Riker. I couldn't have told you anything even if

I'd wanted to."

"*You couldn't have told me!* If I'd known there were Romulans on that planet, I would have taken more reasonable weaponry with me."

"Precisely. We didn't know if there were any Romulans there. We'd have looked a bit stupid if a squad of heavily armed Starfleet personnel had landed there to find a small colony of natives or something."

"The planet was scanned for life forms, Lieutenant."

"The planet was cloaked, sir."

"Keep out of this, Data. What do you mean, cloaked?"

"The Romulans seem to have created a field that reflects all scans. That is why shuttles were used, in case the field also disrupted the transporter signals. Ah, it is time to dock."

No wonder Starfleet wanted this planet investigated. With a cloaking device like that, the Romulans could go anywhere they wanted. Now I'm beginning to realize why this all had to be top secret.

"I'm sorry, Hellena,..."

"Katrina."

"What? Oh, sorry, Katrina. I shouldn't have taken this out on you. I realize now why it was all so secretive."

"It's okay. It's only to be expected considering what we've been through. We've finally landed. It sure is great to be back."

"I know what you mean, I can't wait to hit the shower."

The doors to the shuttle opened.

"Glad to see you back, Number One. We were worried about you."

"Glad to be back, Captain."

Boy, am I glad to be back!



FRIENDS

I'm glad I met you Data, you're a friend I've come to know.
 It's fun to find out what you're like, see the interest that you show.
 I find you very intriguing, I'm proud to call you friend,
 Enjoy your wonder and interest, accept the help you lend.
 You say you are not human, you've been classed as a machine.
 But I've found you understanding, a friend on whom to lean.
 On board this Starship Enterprise you're a valued member of the crew.
 You've shown your capabilities in EVERYTHING you do.
 Now looking back to all that's past, it seems so long ago.
 I find that I was right to say, "Nice to meet you, Pinocchio".

Helen Connor



GENESIS

by

Gaile Wood

It hung in the void like a sapphire - a great, vast sun, a young star that burned its fuel with abandon, squandering energy as all blue giants do.

Unlike many stars off the main sequence, this young giant had a small family of planets, two of which were brown dwarfs - those near-stars that might have been if the main member of their local group had not greedily snatched all available matter for its own use.

There had been enough rocky material for three other planets, two of which were placed too close to their parent, and they alternately froze or burned. Their faces showed the scars of heavy bombardment, and their surfaces were in constant turmoil.

Planet Three orbited just within that narrow band where carbon-based, oxygen-breathing life may develop - and develop it did; a most surprising circumstance, as most blue giants were not stable enough, nor did they have long enough lives, for their children to become life bearers - generally.

Life on Three was harsh and vicious, the planet barely M type. There was a nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere, and water - but not much of that. Twenty-six degrees Celsius was a cool day, temperatures usually reaching into the late thirties, and often a burning hot wind added to the general discomfort.

Three was hot, but not barren. Plants and animals on Three evolved the ability to be superselective, taking advantage of any niche left by biological disasters, to mimic and assimilate any characteristics that proved useful in the survival of their species. All living things on this world existed in a cold war of sorts - an escalation of who could poison who most efficiently, until standoff was reached and all species were immune to one another's efforts.

Late in the twenty-second century the blue giant and her family had been discovered on the very boundaries of the new Federation's space, and immediately created enormous interest in the scientific communities of several worlds. After much talk, it was agreed that a mixed group would leave for this fascinating system, to collate information and to share breakthroughs in the fields of genetics, biology, and botany.

The Azure Lady was sent on her way amid much publicity, her crew and scientific team sure in the knowledge that they would be responsible for great discoveries.

Four years after Azure Lady arrived at her destination, the reports - which had been frequent - ceased. Ships were sent to find

out what had happened, as communications had had no effect. When it was finally agreed that the personnel of the Azure Lady had met with some natural catastrophe, all searches were terminated.

The twenty-fourth century arrived. Communications started to come from a source that had been forgotten by all but a few souls - a mediocre planet, far from the usual routes of Federation traffic. There was consternation when realization dawned that the messages were coming from what had been designated a 'lost' ship. That ship, it seemed, had become a colony, and that colony wanted to become a member of the Federation. With one reservation - only people vetted by their scientists could be allowed to come to Cho'a (as the colonists called their planet) because of the hostile nature of the world on which they would be expected to work and live.

One of the colonists who came from Cho'a was Dr. Marie Goodall, who became renowned in her field as a geneticist - not just for her outstanding work, but also for her outstanding temperament.

Thirty-seven years after she and her colleagues had arrived in the U.F.P., she decided that they would be returning to Cho'a.

The Enterprise, her Captain, Jean-Luc Picard, and crew were given the delicate task of returning these persons to their home world.

Marie was exultant - they were going home with more than they could have possibly hoped for.

The woman gazed icily out of the main screen at Captain Picard, nodding curtly in response.

"Thank you, Captain, my daughter and I will report directly to the transporter room as you request."

Turning slightly, she cut off the communication, replacing the view of her face with that of the planet they were orbiting. Picard raised his brows at the abruptness of her manner, reflecting that perhaps he should not be surprised, considering the rather formidable reputation Dr. Goodall possessed.

At his side Will Riker stirred with indignation. "I can't imagine anyone wanting that woman in charge of staff, no matter how efficient she is."

"Yes," agreed Picard, "I shall be relieved when I no longer have the responsibility for her, her daughter or her staff. A most difficult person. I would be grateful, Number One, if you could ensure they leave the Enterprise safely," the Captain's face acquired an irritated expression, "with as few problems as possible... and expeditiously." He rose, stepping away from the command chair, "I shall be in my ready room should you require me."

Riker stood as Captain Picard left. "Mr. Data, you have the bridge. Lt. Worf, come with me. Let's make sure the Captain's good humour is restored by ensuring there's no trace of Dr. Goodall remaining."

Riker made his way to the turbolift, Worf following to take up

position beside him. Riker glanced at the Security Chief from the corner of his eye and asked, "What about you, Worf? Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

Worf considered the question briefly, but decided the Commander was being flippant and shook his massive head dismissively.

Riker chuckled quietly. "Transporter room two." They rode silently the rest of the way, exiting rapidly to the transporter room.

As they entered, a tall spare woman turned and glared at them both. Her eyes flickered over the officers - then, ignoring them, she turned away to supervise the equipment being loaded onto the transporter platform. She carefully placed an iridescent object to one side, displacing several pieces of what appeared to be delicate apparatus with less care than they seemed to call for. Then she picked it up again, cradling it carefully in her arms.

"I shall take this myself. It is far too delicate to be trusted to the ministrations of underlings." As she spoke, she glared balefully at the unfortunate Ensign operating the transporter controls.

Riker cleared his throat, "Dr. Goodall, I hope things are proceeding satisfactorily. If you require further..."

He trailed off as she directed her gaze at him. She had the uncanny knack of making him feel like an errant schoolboy; colour started to creep up his neck and into his face. *Damn the woman*, he thought.

Goodall regarded him steadily, coldly appraising him. She started to speak, but was interrupted by the appearance of a younger woman carrying an item similar to the one she held. Goodall turned her attention away from Riker - to his intense relief.

"Yes, Marie, it is safe." The woman looked over at Riker, smiling slightly. She transferred the item to a position under her left arm, extending her other hand. It was slightly grubby. Noticing, she wiped it on the thigh of her jumpsuit before offering it to him again.

"I'm Theresa Walsh." She shook his hand as she spoke. Her hand, besides being dirty, was warm and slightly calloused, as though she was accustomed to using her hands for physical tasks.

She continued, "Please, call me Terri; more friendly than Dr. Walsh. Don't you agree?"

Riker smiled back at her, struck by the dissimilarity between them. Walsh was also slender, but all fire, whereas her associate was solid glacier - and just as immovable. Both women were above average height, although Dr. Goodall loomed over Dr. Walsh by at least ten centimetres.

Walsh flicked a long braid of deep chestnut behind her, offering her hand to Worf also. He took it, grasping it firmly for a moment before releasing her.

"Dr. Walsh," he said.

"Terri, please."

Worf inclined his head towards her. "Terri."

Behind her and slightly to the right of him, Worf observed Dr. Goodall radiating disapproval and scarcely disguised impatience.

"If you are quite ready, Theresa, I should like to continue with the removal of equipment and our own evacuation from this - " she paused scornfully, quite aware the officers had become rigidly attentive - "ship."

Terri eyed her with dislike. "Take this. I think you would rather have it in your keeping, wouldn't you?" She shoved the object she carried forcefully in Goodall's direction, seemingly not caring whether it fell to the floor. With a gasp of anger, Dr. Goodall clutched at it, carefully placing both on the transporter platform. They sat scintillating, colours of the rainbow in their faceted sides.

Commander Riker moved forward to take a closer look; a hand on his forearm stopped him. He glanced at Terri, who shook her head at him imperceptibly, mouthing at him to follow her. She disappeared through the doors and into the corridor. Riker signalled for Worf to remain where he was, but Goodall interrupted him, saying, "Take your guard with you. I have no use for such a creature."

Worf glared at the woman; if he had not had an opinion before, he was certainly forming one now - that Dr. Goodall was one Human female the galaxy would probably be better without. Regretfully, he could not do anything to rectify the situation. On that unsatisfactory thought he turned smartly on his heel, marching out to the corridor after the others.

He joined Riker and Terri as they made their way to the turbolift, walking a short distance behind them.

Apologising, Terri sighed, "I would like to say that she is sorry for being so... " She paused, at a loss for words. "I would like to say she is sorry, but I know she is not. She was just being the Dr. Marie Goodall we all know and love."

Riker snorted. "That woman is unbelievable - the rudest, most arrogant person I've ever had the misfortune to meet. No offence to you, Dr. Walsh."

Worf grunted in agreement.

Terri drew her brows together in a frown, a flicker of irritation passing over elegant features. "Back to formalities now, Commander?" she asked. "Please, don't compare me with Marie; she is a very hard act to live up to - and believe me, I don't even want to try. So why don't we forget the last few minutes ever happened, and start again?"

Riker nodded agreement. "Could Worf or I be of assistance to you, Doctor?" At a glance from her, he amended that. "Terri." He smiled.

She paused thoughtfully at the doors to the turbolift, stepping inside as they opened. "Well, all the staff are planetside - with the exception of myself and Marie - and most of the equipment went with them. One of you could help with my plants, I suppose."

"Plants?" Riker felt confused.

"That's right - green things with leaves and stuff." His expression amused her. "My hobby," she explained. "I need it to calm my nerves when Marie gets on them. Very soothing - it stops me from taking it out on someone else."

Grinning, Riker said, "I can see why you might need them."

"What I fail to understand," Worf interjected, "is how plants could prevent anyone from doing that woman serious injury."

"It's not easy, Lieutenant," agreed Terri, "but matricide is still a criminal offence - unfortunately for me - and worse still, I'm a law-abiding person. So you see, my hands are tied. It's a constant source of disappointment to me."

"Matricide?" Worf queried. "She is your mother?"

Astonished, Riker shook his head, and stepping into the turbolift beside Worf, said, "But you are so unlike her."

Terri requested her destination then turned so that she faced them. She answered slowly, "Could be because of my natural grace, charm and beauty... or because - thank God - " hesitating as the lift stopped - "she's not my biological parent." Stepping through the doors with the two officers, she added, "She adopted me after my parents were killed in an accident while I was a small child. As I have no living relatives, and she was my parents' trusted colleague..." She shrugged. "Here I am."

They stopped outside the door of one of the cabins assigned to visitors, and she opened it, stepping inside. Riker and Worf stood politely on the threshold, but she gestured them in with a wave of her hand. Around them were containers filled with a great many plants; some were in flower, but most seemed to be grown for foliage. Riker recognized a few of the species that were on display, pausing by a particularly handsome specimen with sculpted leaves. Worf examined a tree-like fern that hung decoratively over the utilitarian table in the quarters. Some of the pots showed signs of having recently been refilled; there were also a few untidy piles of dead leaves and cuttings scattered around the room.

"All of these are to go planetside?" Worf asked.

Terri widened her eyes at him. "I wouldn't want to go anywhere without them; especially if I have to be in Marie's company for any length of time. Not even a whole planet has enough space."

Worf rumbled his agreement.

Riker, who had been looking around the room, turned his attention back to Terri. "If this is just your hobby, then what is your function on the team?"

"I'm the xenobiologist - I do the dissection and classification of any new species. I've also got to go through some reports - including one of Marie's - to try to bring them up to date." She grimaced slightly, "Not a very interesting part of my job, but necessary. And - at least - part of that is done now."

She started to move some of the pots towards the door of her quarters. They were disturbed by an insistent beeping filling the room.

Riker tapped his combadge. "Riker here."

The Captain's voice came through; he sounded stressed. "Commander, we appear to be encountering some difficulties after all."

"Sir?"

"Is Worf with you? This concerns him also."

"Yes. What's the problem, Captain?" Riker asked.

"All the personnel who beamed down have disappeared. Data has scanned the designated area and found no trace of any humanoid life forms."

Riker frowned, "No trace, sir? Not possible - our scanners - "

"Are still machines, although sophisticated. And they do not register the personnel that transported to Cho'a."

"A malfunction?" Worf suggested.

A short silence. "Not on this occasion, Lieutenant." The Captain now sounded merely weary.

Observing that Dr. Walsh seemed troubled, Worf spoke again. "Captain, Dr. Goodall's daughter is still aboard. Perhaps she may be able to give some insight- "

"She may indeed! Miss...?"

"Dr. Walsh," Terri supplied. "But Captain, I'm not sure if I will be of much assistance. The information I have you probably already possess." She went on quietly, "Have you tried to contact my mother?"

"Yes, Doctor, we have."

"Response?"

"None."

"None." She repeated the word without much surprise, sitting down on a nearby chair and drumming her fingers on the table top.

"A staff meeting in ten minutes, Mr. Riker. Join me in the observation lounge - oh, and bring Dr. Walsh with you. Picard out."

Deanna Troi relaxed in her chair, contemplating the woman who sat opposite. All she could detect from Dr. Walsh was a feeling of irritation, mixed with some anxiety; she was telling the truth about not knowing what had happened to either the science team or the Enterprise personnel - of that Troi could be certain.

Troi turned her attention back to the discussion. Geordi had just finished explaining why there was no instrument malfunction.

The Captain leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, "Very well. A hypothesis, please."

Data spoke. "Sir, the team literally disappeared. One moment we were receiving their life readings, the next we were not. Scanning the transport area has produced no clues as to what might have happened. We are receiving information concerning native species however, and it is possible the personnel are shielded by unknown factors which are impervious to our equipment."

Deanna chipped in. "Sir, we do know that they are alive; I sense their presences. I feel that Data is correct; they must be shielded from us in some way."

Picard glanced once more around the table at his staff. "What do we know for certain?"

Terri decided to speak. "We know that Cho'a has been a 'lost' colony. That only in the last thirty seven years has it reclaimed Federation membership; that Marie Goodall was one of the first colonists to go off planet. The only thing we know for certain is we have no up-to-date information concerning this world or inhabitants - other than what I've got stored up here." She tapped her forehead, and sat back.

Picard said, "Thank you, Dr. Walsh. Does anyone have anything further to add?"

"I recommend we send another team to the surface, sir," said Worf.

Picard nodded. "Possibly, Mr. Worf."

"Terri, you mentioned you had access to a report, or reports. Did they contain information that could help us?" Riker asked.

Leaning forward, Terri rested her chin in the heel of one hand. "The information contained in that report concerned Marie's work as a geneticist. There were a few notations about the effects of poisoning from native species on Human tissue - apparently there are a number of unpleasant genetic effects if the affected person does not die first."

"Cho'a is dangerous, in your opinion?"

"Commander," Terri said, "between what Marie told me and what I read - some of it being pretty detailed - most of the flora and fauna of that world is inimical to humanoid life. If it doesn't poison you, it'll try to eat you. There are exceptions; some Terran species have managed to adapt to the conditions, but not without extensive genetic engineering."

Riker stared at the table. "I agree with Worf. I recommend we send another away team, although it seems we would be wise to exercise a good deal of caution. We don't want to make a bad situation worse. I suggest Worf and I form the team - no others."

Terri stared angrily at Riker. "I don't agree. If you have me on that team, you'll have a much better chance of survival - at least I know something about Cho'an life forms. You don't. Besides, I owe Marie some filial duty, and if you don't take me, I'll go anyway - on my own."

Captain Picard folded his arms. "I have to agree with Dr. Walsh, Number One. She is correct in that if she is on the team, she will be able to act as adviser." He went on, "You, Worf and Dr.

Walsh." He addressed Terri. "Doctor, if you would inform Commander Riker whether there are any particular needs that must be met?"

Dismissing the rest of his staff with a gesture, Picard signalled for Troi to remain after the others left.

As the door closed on the last one, he asked, "What is your assessment of Dr. Walsh?"

"She is very strong-minded," Troi said. "A woman who is used to getting her own way."

"Anything else?"

Troi gazed at her Captain. "A strong feeling of irritation."

"Oh?"

"Yes," she continued. "She thought we were not doing all we could to find out what had happened. She was not impressed."

"A woman who wants rapid answers, hmm, Counselor? Let us hope she will be supplied with them as quickly as we need to be."

Terri checked the small emergency medical kit Dr. Crusher had given her. It contained a hypo, antihistamines and counteragents for some of the more virulent poisons present in the flora of Cho'a. She nodded at Worf and Riker as they came into the transporter room.

"Gentlemen," she said, "please ensure that you do not touch any plants without consulting me first."

"And the fauna?" asked Worf.

Terri grinned at him, "If anything gets that close - shoot it. You can ask questions later."

Both officers set their phasers on heavy stun.

Riker tapped his communicator. "Sir, away team ready to beam down on your order."

"Thank you, Number One. Good luck."

Riker joined Worf and Terri on the transporter platform. He hoped luck would not be something they required, but he had a bad feeling about this place; a feeling they had bitten off more than they could chew.

"Ready?" asked O'Brien.

Riker nodded.

"We have a green panel, sir," the ensign said.

O'Brien ran his fingers up the controls. On the platform the away team dissolved in the sparkle of the transporter beam.

Even though she knew Cho'a to be hot, Terri had not prepared herself for the overwhelming heat; it staggered her at first. Standing where they had materialised, she could feel the sweat starting to prickle between her shoulder blades and her upper lip dewing.

Worf was frowning ferociously at the tricorder in his hand. He made some rapid adjustments; scowling harder, he said, "Commander, the tricorder does not appear to be functional."

Riker, who had been surveying the surrounding terrain, turned, walking over to Worf who handed him the instrument. He examined it for a few moments, satisfying himself that there was no fault.

"Well, whatever's here affects tricorders too, it seems." He tapped his combadge. "Riker to Enterprise."

To his surprise he got a response.

"Data here. I hope everything is in order, sir?"

Riker glanced at his companions. "If you mean, 'are we okay', I can say yes to that. But," he added, "our tricorders seem to be affected. Are you receiving our readings?"

"Intriguing. We are indeed, Commander," the android replied. "Are there any other instrument malfunctions to report, sir?"

"None - so far." Shading his eyes from the sun's glare, Riker went on, "We'll be in touch, Data. Riker out."

In the near distance he could see bulbous trunked trees, the crowns of lavender gold fronds gently waving in the torrid breeze. An all pervading scent filled the air; a perfume of hot soil, of cinnamon, of alien plants and alien life. The shadows on the ground cast by their bodies were deep and blue-black - intensely sharp at the edges - and a haze mirrored the plain, refracting the light of the blue sun.

No matter how often Riker came to a new world, he always had the same sense of wonder and excitement seizing him.

Under their feet was short tufted grasslike stuff with coarse blades, looking like mauve twigs stuck in dusty red earth. Terri Walsh was examining this with interest. From her right boot she produced a knife, and proceeded to dig up a piece of plant to study the root system.

"Interesting," she murmured. "Legume-like root nodules. I wonder whether they use bacteria to fix nitrogen?" Dropping the sample into a small plastic bag, she put it carefully into a pack that was strapped to a belt at her waist. Cleaning the blade of the knife on her leg, Terri folded it, sliding it back into her boot.

"Suggest a direction, Terri," Riker said.

She stood, dusting off her hands. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "Marie did not have any maps in her possession. Perhaps if we head towards those." She pointed towards the trees, pushing a strand of hair which had come free from her braid behind her ear. She frowned slightly. "Is that a track?"

Looking in the same direction, Worf moved swiftly to check if

she was correct. Going down on one knee, he ran his hand along the ground to part the plants so he could see more clearly. "Yes," he affirmed, rising agilely.

"Let's go, people." Riker set off using long strides. "We should get out of the direct sun before we all start suffering from heat exhaustion."

Terri and Worf followed in his footsteps.

Riker asked, "Terri, what else can you recall that could be useful?"

"Only that it might be helpful if we got off this open plain as quickly as possible."

"Why?" asked Worf.

"Because," she said, starting to run, "one of the predators native to this region is not too fussy about whether the protein it ingests is alien or not." Then she gasped, "One of 'em is tracking us right now!"

Alarmed, Worf and Riker drew their phasers, surveying the area. "Where is this predator?" Worf rumbled. "I do not see it."

The two officers trotted beside the scientist, casting glances about them. "Not on the surface," Terri explained, picking up speed, "under it - I felt the vibrations."

"Under it!" Riker and Worf exclaimed together.

Nodding, she managed to say, "Save your breath - run like hell."

As the trees came nearer Terri flung herself the last few metres, landing on her belly just beside one of the massive trunks. Slipping, scrambling, she got up onto her feet, stumbling into the centre of the wood. Worf and Riker were seconds behind her; she gestured, too breathless to speak, at what was rearing its head out of the ground - a great ravening maw lined with row upon row of obsidian fangs gnashed futilely at the empty space which they had been occupying moments before.

"What in God's name is that?" Riker gulped in air, wiping the perspiration from his face with his arm.

Terri just motioned them to move further into the safety of the wood, where she bent and put her hands on her knees. She coughed, "That's Cho'a's idea of an earthworm."

"How did the team get across that area without being troubled?" Worf indicated the huge creature blindly seeking around the copse perimeter.

Glancing up at him, Terri asked, "Have you noticed how little animal life there seems to be at the moment? How quiet everything is?"

Worf looked thoughtful. "I had not."

"Well," Terri continued, "it's possible that most of the fauna do the sensible thing and hole up from the worst of the heat; there

are analogous examples on many planets. But because that - "nodding at the worm - "is of a subterranean habit, it would like as not be unaffected; therefore anything moving openly on the plain at this moment could be potential prey."

"I still do not see how that would affect whether the missing personnel survived," Worf interrupted impatiently.

Terri glared at him. "If you'll let me continue, I'll explain. As I was about to say, it is probably 'blinded' by over stimulation of its sensory bristles earlier in the day because of traffic across that area; then once the heat of midday arrives - " she shifted slightly in irritation as Worf became palpably more impatient - "the traffic dies away, allowing it to 'see'. So if you're caught exposed during the middle of the day *it'll* realize there's food about, and *you're* so much dead meat!"

"So," Riker said, "the team didn't encounter the predator because they beamed down at the right time."

"Basically, yes."

Sighing, Riker suggested, "Let's find somewhere we can hole up."

Separating into three directions, they started exploring the area within the copse, keeping within earshot of each other.

Finding an opening in one of the trunks, Worf ducked down, cautiously poking his head through to the interior. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could see the hole opened into a much larger cavity which appeared to slope downwards fairly steeply not too far from him. He withdrew. "Sir!"

Riker signalled to Terri, then they made their way over to where Worf stood. Moving past her, Riker considered the entrance. "Worf, you go through first."

Ducking back down, Worf managed to squeeze his large frame through the aperture; once he was inside, Riker indicated Terri should go next. The air hung like a heavy curtain, hot as a furnace within the hollow; at least there had been the solace of a breeze outside.

"Unpleasant!" Terri remarked. She felt claustrophobic, with the two big men crushing her between them; she had to push hard to get them out of her way.

She pushed too hard and fell, rolling some distance down the slope until a large root sticking out of the floor stopped her. Reaching her first, Worf took her arm. "Are you all right?" he asked. He examined her carefully, making sure he could see no external damage.

Wincing, Terri tipped her head. "Think so - everything *seems* to be working. No bones broken, anyway."

He helped her up. Terri took a sharp breath when she put weight on her left ankle; leaning on Worf she hopped over to Riker, sitting heavily back down on the ground. Removing her boot, she examined her leg.

"Trouble?" Riker asked.

Terri rubbed her ankle; there was the beginning of a large purple bruise spreading up her calf. She shook her head. "No, I'll be fine - I think I just gave it a bad knock."

Slipping her boot back on, she rose. "I might slow you down."

"Can you walk?" Worf inquired.

Terri tried a few small steps. "Yes."

At a slightly slower pace they moved steadily downwards. After about thirty metres, the incline levelled out and they found themselves in a tunnel which stretched off into the distance. As the trio proceeded further, light levels started to increase, becoming brighter with each step. The walls of the shaft glowed softly with a delicate lilac light which outlined their features eerily. Glancing briefly at Riker, Worf moved to examine the walls more closely. As he reached them, Terri caught at his arm to stop him.

"No," she said firmly. "Let me take a look first."

Standing back, he allowed her to go forward. Carefully, Terri scrutinized the walls. Satisfied that it was harmless, she scraped at the substance with a fingernail. A dark trail was left where she had placed her finger; inspecting it she was gratified to see what she had suspected. Turning, she showed her hand to the two males; the finger glowed.

"Lichen," she said. "Chemical light."

Riker nodded. "Landing party to Enterprise."

"Go ahead, Number One."

"Sir, we are proceeding along a passageway which is heading due south, approximately one and half kilometres from our original co-ordinates. We have not encountered any evidence that the science team or security personnel have met with harm."

"Any evidence of them at all?"

"None, sir."

"Proceed as you were, Commander. Report when you have further information. Enterprise out."

Terri and Worf had moved further up the tunnel, and Riker hastened to catch up with them. When he joined them, they were standing in front of a dead end.

Worf considered the obstacle. Crouching, he inspected it at a closer angle, then lay on his stomach. Grunting with satisfaction, he said, "Commander."

Riker got down to Worf's level. Glancing at him, he put the tips of his fingers into the slim gap Worf had pointed out.

"Okay, how do we get through?"

Terri knelt, sitting back on her heels. Rubbing her forehead, she removed the knife in her boot, flicking the blade into position. Carefully, she slipped the tip of the blade into the

crevice. She jiggled it; it moved a little more freely along the line of the gap.

Worf said, "Permission to use phaser, sir."

Terri stared angrily at the big Klingon. "No!"

Worf growled at her, "I wasn't talking to you."

"Oh, really... "

Riker interrupted before either party could say anything further. "Why not use fire power, Terri? It would be quick."

She removed the flick-knife from the crack, tossing it in her hand. She regarded Worf steadily before she replied, "We don't know what is on the other side - we could damage something important - our missing people for instance. What if I could open this door without resorting to brute force?"

"Can you?"

"Yes," she replied confidently.

"Go ahead."

Terri reinserted the knife blade, running it along the course she had already inscribed. Carefully she placed the tips of the fingers of one hand into the crack, feeling along the edge. She made a small noise of satisfaction when she encountered the locking mechanism; made a slight movement of her wrist; there was a quiet click and the door started to slide open. Terri put her weight behind it, pushing hard.

Riker and Worf stared at her, then, galvanized into action, they helped also.

Terri slid the knife back to its customary place, grinning as she straightened.

"How did you do that?" Riker inquired curiously.

"Impressive. Where did you learn to do it?" Worf asked.

"Don't ask - on both counts! Let's call it a sign of misspent youth." She went through the open door.

Riker tapped his insignia - it did not work. Concerned, he motioned to Worf, who also tried to contact the Enterprise. "No response, sir."

"Interesting," Riker commented. "The effect has increased as we've come further down. You had better keep trying, Worf."

They followed Terri through the aperture; she had stopped and was looking around inquisitively. The door behind them shut - startled, all three spun round. Worf studied it. As on the other side there was no visible mechanism - it had simply sealed itself once more. Only careful inspection would reveal it was an entrance.

"Phaser, Mr. Worf," Riker ordered.

Worf checked the setting of his weapon, then led the way

onwards.

They found themselves in a room which, after the dimness of the passage, was overwhelmingly bright. Machines of some sort were in place around the perimeter; each had a bank of lights flashing off and on in sequence, all humming softly.

Moving to investigate, Riker ran a hand across the face of one of the machines. "Have you ever seen anything like this, Terri?"

Terri shifted her position so she could see more clearly. Interested, she crossed to another of the machines, checking it over. "No, it's not any technology I'm familiar with, Commander."

"Still no response from the Enterprise, sir," Worf reported.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Shall we continue?" He held out his hand and they moved further into the room.

"This seems to be an antechamber, Commander," Worf said. He had scouted ahead of the others, and was investigating another entrance; this one was more clearly delineated.

"An antechamber for what?" asked Riker. He did not like this one little bit; cut off from the Enterprise, unable to get back-up if required, he felt uneasy.

"Let's find out," Terri suggested impatiently. "A little less speculation might be a good idea."

Fortunately, her trick with the knife was not required, the door opening silently as they approached it. Stepping through, Worf found himself trapped; struggling futilely, he tried to shout a warning to the others. He found he could not.

Riker, stepping through in almost the same instant, found himself in a similar situation. Terri merely stopped when she realized she was caught.

Seeing her two male companions so helpless infuriated Terri. She twisted in the grasp of her captor; using her elbows she jabbed backwards sharply into where she presumed the diaphragm would be. Nothing happened. She swore viciously.

"At last, Theresa, you are here."

Out of the shadows, a familiar figure moved into Terri's line of sight. Tall, gaunt, but changed in some subtle way Terri could not fathom at first, Marie Goodall approached her as she stood stock still: observing, weighing, as cool as always.

"Marie?" she asked to be certain.

"It is I."

Terri studied the woman. Around Goodall's head was a glistening, moving cowl which lay across most of her scalp, flowing down the back of her neck and across her shoulders. Staring harder, Terri felt nauseous - a thin silvery rope was pulsating gently; it was inserted into Goodall's right nostril. The creature stirred under her scrutiny; she could see it burying similar, smaller quasi-ropes into the flesh of Goodall's cranium.

"Release her." Goodall spoke to the entity holding Terri's arms so firmly. The grip relaxed; she rubbed some sensation back into them.

"Have you nothing to say?"

Terri shook her head. "Not for myself, Marie. Why hold the Starfleet officers?"

Turning, the tall scientist surveyed Riker and Worf. She said cryptically, "They will prove useful."

Joining Goodall, Terri asked, "What do you intend? And what is that?" She pointed at the 'thing' resting on the older woman's head.

Dr. Goodall laughed; a short, harsh bark. "All in good time. Come, allow us to show you your new home." She took Terri by the elbow, leading her firmly into the dark space from which she had emerged. Other women accompanied them into a turbolift of sorts; they brought the helpless men with them, carrying them easily.

"Are they conscious?" Terri asked. She touched the glittering field holding Riker; her hand resting barely a millimetre from his face. She tested it for resilience, then reaching over to Worf, ran her hand in front of his eyes. She could see rage lurking there.

Goodall watched her. "The Hnr'uk'ri tells me the Klingon is aware of more than the Human - but we expected that."

The lift, which had been plummeting steadily downwards as they had spoken, finally stopped. The door opened and Goodall propelled Terri forcefully through.

They faced one another in an enormous cavern bright with artificial light, a Human environment; a replica of the surface save for a few important details. There were streets and homes; buildings of all shapes and different sizes; people going about their business. Staring, Terri felt amazement. Something struck her suddenly. "Where are the men?"

The adults and children were all female - not a single male. Each was covered to a greater or lesser degree in a silvery sheath.

"Come with me." Goodall ignored her question, taking her arm, pushing her in the direction the women had taken. Following them gave Terri a chance to take stock of her surroundings; she became aware of attracting a good deal of attention. Several small children clustered behind them, tagging along at a safe distance. She could sense a distinct difference in the interest she generated to that directed at the males; she could discern carefully controlled excitement - mixed with revulsion for them.

The three of them were taken to a large building set back from the others; it had a well-used look about it.

Goodall's grip on her arm grew tighter as they went into a large, echoing hall, crossing to an area sealed by a field that shimmered purple and gold fire. At a movement from Goodall, the women and their burden stepped into the field and vanished from sight.

There was no time to question Goodall - the scientist pushed

her firmly through the field from behind, and she found herself on her own in a darkened room, save for a machine, one attendant, and something amorphous, iridescent and alluringly beautiful.

Terri felt she would be finding out at first hand what her adoptive mother had living parasitically on and in her. She decided she did not want to know.

Surreptitiously she scanned the room, checking for a way out. There was none that she could see. Forcing herself to appear unconcerned, she moved carefully to the edge, away from the other woman and that beguiling horror awaiting her.

"Dr. Walsh." The woman spoke quietly; in the stillness of the room it echoed like a scream.

Terri jumped. *So much for remaining calm*, she thought. She made a slight noise of pain, hoping it would distract the attendant. It did.

Limping, she stumbled against the wall, then crouched. Moaning, Terri slipped the flick-knife from her boot, keeping it hidden in her palm. She drooped as if the pain from her ankle had become too much to bear, peering through lowered lashes to see if the woman had fallen for her ruse.

She need not have worried. The attendant approached, stepping unwarily closer. Terri grabbed her outstretched arm, using it to propel her into the wall with considerable force.

While the woman was still dazed from the impact, Terri slipped behind her, placing the point of the blade into the angle of neck and jawline.

Whispering into her exposed ear, Terri said, "I don't want to hurt you, but I need some information." The woman struggled in her grip, so Terri pressed the knife firmly upwards; she was rewarded by the trickle of blood. "What are the Hnr'uk'ri? Where are my companions? What - " she nodded her head in the direction of the heaving *thing* - "is that?"

The woman uttered a hoarse gurgle, coughing as Terri relaxed her grip enough to allow her to speak. "It is Hn'uk'a, it will be Hnr'uk'ri; the companion."

"Don't try my patience. You're speaking in riddles."

"The companion," the woman insisted.

It clicked in Terri's brain. The cowl - that was what she was talking about. A companion - for what? "Where are my friends? How do I get out of here?" As she spoke she relaxed a little more, giving the woman more freedom; it was a mistake.

With a speed that defied her understanding Terri found herself hurled away from the other female, who sprang to her feet, following Terri, as she came to rest some distance away. Winded, Terri had managed to retain her grip on the knife; now she curled into a foetal ball as she waited for the attack.

As she had expected, the woman reached for her by bending over her, lowering her centre of gravity. Terri uncurled, rolling out of the way; bounding to her feet she kicked the other woman's legs from

under her. Terri dropped on her as she fell, but became caught in a wrestling match she had no hope of winning. The knife was suddenly more important than she thought. Desperately, she tried to keep it out of the woman's grasp, pushing her away with all her power. As the struggle continued, Terri found herself pinned with relentless strength. Overwhelmed, she made one last desperate effort to escape, then the woman gasped. The flick-knife protruded from her rib-cage. Shocked, Terri stumbled away, staring first at the wound, then at her hands which now had blood on them. Seeing the other woman was badly hurt, Terri approached her, gently pulling the blade free. Blood welled from the wound she had inflicted; the bleeding ceased as the woman stopped breathing.

Terri sat back on her heels. She had to remain collected. It had happened, the unthinkable. She had killed. No time for grief or regret; that must come later. Common sense prevailed, and she examined the woman carefully, trying to find a clue as to her whereabouts - and those of Worf and Riker. Finding nothing useful to her, Terri pushed the body to the edge of the room, collecting her equipment as she went. She could not afford to lose anything important, anything that might give them or her a better chance of survival.

Creating a state of composure within herself, Terri began to search the room more thoroughly for an exit. She found a cleverly concealed doorway - it had been holographically disguised. Opening that door was simpler than the other had been.

She stepped warily into the corridor beyond it. Now to find out what the hell was happening!

"Sir."

Something about the Ensign's tone made Data leave his position, and cross to the con where Wesley Crusher was sitting. Standing just to the side of Wes, he peered at the console over the young man's shoulder.

"Fascinating," Data breathed. He put his hand to his communicator. "Captain to the bridge." And as an afterthought, "Counselor Troi, report to the bridge."

Moments later, Captain Picard was at his side. "Report, Commander."

"Captain," Data said, "Ensign Crusher drew my attention to the same phenomenon we observed with the earlier landing party. We are not receiving Commander Riker or his party."

"Has Counselor Troi been informed?"

As the android officer replied affirmatively, Picard turned in time to see Troi stepping from the turbolift. She made her way down the ramp, joining them as they stood behind Wes.

"Counselor," Picard said, "how are the away team?"

Troi concentrated, feeling her way delicately along the emotional pathway that identified Riker to her. She could feel he was uneasy about whatever was going on: as for the other two, Worf was... Worf, Dr. Walsh - merely curious.

Opening her eyes, Troi answered the Captain's question. "They are well, sir." She hoped she sounded reassuring.

Picard nodded. "Thank you. Is there a change in status of the other personnel?"

"Again, Captain, I can only tell you that..." Troi gasped, becoming rigid. Alarmed, Captain Picard and Data helped the Betazoid to her chair, where she became limp. Her eyes rolled.

"Dr. Crusher to bridge!" Picard snapped.

"No, sir. That's not necessary." Troi's voice sounded weak, even to herself. "I'm fine now."

"What was it you sensed?"

"Nothing."

Picard stared at her. "Nothing?"

Troi tipped her head back, trying to gather her shattered senses into some kind of order. Placing fingertips to her temples she bent forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I mean that I do not feel them any more - not directly. They seem to be at a distance from me. I can't explain exactly," she finished lamely. "All is not well."

"Are they dead?" asked Data.

Troi raised her dark head; her lovely eyes carrying remnants of tears in fathomless depths. "No, they are not dead."

"Sir, do you wish us to take a course of action?" Data's voice intruded on the Captain's thoughts.

Picard turned to watch the viewscreen thoughtfully, before he came to a decision. "We wait - for the moment, at least - unless the Counselor has anything further to add."

"How long do we wait, sir?" Troi asked flatly.

Picard sighed, then shook his head. "The Commander and Worf are very resourceful. Dr. Walsh seems to know what she is doing. I am not willing to risk any more personnel, Counselor. As you have pointed out, all of them are still alive. If - " his voice hardened - "you report any of our people have been harmed, then I will review the situation. At the moment, our interests are best served by sitting tight - even though we may not like it."

Worf became aware of an anxious female face as he faded in and out of consciousness. He coughed, liquid spilling from mouth and nostrils as he tried to sit up. The woman reached for him, helping to steady him. Wordlessly, she wiped fluid from his face and chest; she put his arm around her shoulders, managing to heave him into an upright position.

He coughed again. "Where is Commander Riker?"

"There." Terri pointed at a supine figure.

"Is he injured?"

"No. He's fine, as far as I can see. He just hasn't got a Klingon's constitution."

Worf grunted, rising to his feet. He was on a slightly raised platform which had recently had sides, forming a container of sorts - he sat roughly in the middle. This had apparently been filled with a viscous solution which clung to him gelatinously. He and the Commander had been stripped.

"Where are our uniforms and phasers?"

Terri shrugged. "God only knows." Turning away from Worf, she crouched down beside Riker. "Would you help me lift him?"

Worf put his arms around Riker's chest. Lifting the Human did not present any difficulties, even though the Commander was not yet conscious. Worf propped him against the side of the platform, where he slumped, head down. Terri took another piece of cloth, and vigorously wiped Riker with it. He coughed, then started to splutter. Liquid, which Terri diligently cleaned away, streamed down his chest.

"You were not imprisoned," Worf stated bluntly.

Terri did not speak as she concentrated on the Commander. "Suspicious, aren't you?" She stood and threw a bundle at him. "They had something interesting planned for me." She eyed him dubiously. "I hope they fit. They're all I could find."

Worf caught the bundle; it was clothing - a coverall, a pair of soft boots. There was another similar pile by her feet. He dressed quickly.

"You have not answered my question." He took her wrist, twisting her sharply to face him.

Terri stared pointedly at his hand, raising angry eyes. "Nor will I, unless you let go of me. I object to being man-handled." Worf released her reluctantly, and she shook some sensation back into her numb fingers. "I was imprisoned. What they had in store for *me* was to become attached to a parasite."

Worf folded his arms. "So you say - what proof have I?"

She spat angrily at him, "What do you want, blood?"

"That might help."

Terri made an exasperated noise. "If I'm with them, why am I here? Why should I help you?"

"You could be a spy."

"I could..." she started.

"Don't take any notice of him, Terri. He's always like this."

As a new voice broke into their conversation, both looked down to see Riker making an effort to get to his feet. Worf helped his commanding officer to stand; Terri gave him the clothing.

Riker dressed, and while he did he noticed Terri seemed subdued. "Something is bothering you?" he asked her.

Her face was distressed. "I found your missing personnel."

Worf became very alert. He growled at her, "Why didn't you mention that to me?"

"You," Terri stressed the pronoun, "didn't ask - you were too bloody suspicious."

Riker interceded, "Where did you find them, Terri?"

Still bristling like a cat, Terri turned her attention back to Riker. "If you're feeling okay, I'll take you there. But please be quiet."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Lead on."

She headed past the platforms and accompanying support machines into a high narrow corridor, then into a larger room. Keeping to the shadows, she led them out onto a walkway. She hurried; they followed in a like fashion.

Just as Riker was beginning to think that Worf's doubts about her integrity might be based on fact, she turned off into another room. Upon entering, Riker and Worf stopped dead in their tracks. There were the platforms they had seen before; but upon them rested vats, each holding one of the missing personnel, immersed in that glutinous fluid they had been covered with.

Each person within the vat had a number of fine tubes attaching him to a machine. There was a curious noise coming from all of the vats, a low-pitched whine that increased faintly if any of the away team came too close. A brief discussion decided it could be an early warning system; one that would monitor possible danger to the sleepers. Touching them did not noticeably increase the noise, so they were able to consider themselves not to be the danger the vats were being protected from.

Riker walked around one of the containers. "Am I to understand we were being similarly monitored? Do you know how long for? Why keep Worf and me somewhere else?"

"To your first question, yes. Your next, about fifteen hours, I think. Finally, my guess is no more room in this store. There's more." She sounded ill.

"Show us," Worf said.

She took them to another room, the door sliding open as they approached. "Go see for yourselves - I don't want to go in there again."

Worf held her elbow firmly, "No, you come with us."

The three of them entered; it was lit differently. The illumination was dim and red - neither Worf nor Riker could make out what they were seeing at first. More alien machinery was attached to plinths, on which sat squat rectangular cases.

Riker stepped closer to one of the cases. "Dear God!"

Worf joined him with Terri in tow. In the cabinet was a conglomerate of merged flesh, writhing with life - part Human, part something else - something none of them had ever seen before. And in the seething mass were organs, eyes and limbs - it was repellent.

Terri wrenched her elbow out of Worf's grip. "Not very pretty is it?" Her voice grated out between clenched teeth.

Before them stretched a vast hollow, filled with row upon row of cases, each with a similar occupant.

"I came upon this by accident," Terri said softly, "while I was trying to find you." She added, "Nearly all of them has one of those in it. If you don't mind, gentlemen, I'll let you look all you want on your own." She moved back to the door.

"I think I've seen enough." Riker sounded sombre. "Worf, let's get out of here." Both men retraced their steps to the outer chamber.

They found Terri gazing into the face of one of the crew. "They," she waved a hand around the room, "are all male. Weren't there any women?"

"No," Worf said. "Dr. Goodall requested male personnel only."

Riker paced around the chamber, coming to a halt beside her. "You must have an idea of what is going on, Terri. What were they going to do with us?"

Terri regarded him silently. "I do have an idea of sorts. I need to discuss it with you both."

"Is there an exit, without going the way we came?" Worf asked, pragmatic as always.

"Can you see one?"

Worf climbed onto one of the vats to take a closer look at the ceiling. Getting down from that vantage point, he vaulted onto another where the ceiling curved downwards within easier reach. Frustrated that this was not opening any avenues, he started to check the walls and floor more thoroughly. Riker and Terri helped.

"This is useless," Terri announced finally. "We don't have any choice but to go back the way we came. But what about them?" she went on. "Do we try and revive them?"

"No." Worf glanced briefly at her. "That would waste time. If we can communicate with the Enterprise, then we will be better able to help them."

"Okay, now we agree," Riker said, "it might be a good time to go." He strode away from them. Terri and Worf followed as he stepped once more onto the walkway outside the chamber.

They were very fortunate in that the walkway did not seem to be frequented often; they made their way upwards and away from the chambers in the rock with no disturbance. Terri and Riker found they did not feel like discussing the grisly discoveries at that moment, and Worf, in whom taciturnity was developed to a fine art, was not inclined to speak of it either.

Once the three managed to get far enough away from the chambers and the items they contained, Riker signalled they should take a rest. Declining to take the opportunity, Worf spent the time exploring. He came back to find the Humans deep in conversation. Acknowledging his companions, he sat down beside Commander Riker, listening in silence.

"You might be interested to hear what we've thrashed out between ourselves as a theory, Lieutenant," Riker said.

"That is?" Worf was still not certain he trusted this woman, although she had been of assistance and had not led them into a trap as he suspected she might.

Terri folded her arms and, ignoring Worf, addressed Riker. "Still on the defensive, isn't he. What do you do to get such a stiff-necked..." She searched for a suitable word, but could not find any that fitted her perception of Worf. She felt frustrated, because she did not know how to deal with his open hostility.

"I will not be spoken about as if I'm not present," Worf grated.

Riker found himself exasperated with them both. "I'd be grateful if you'd put the personal stuff on hold, so we can get on with the matter in hand."

Terri had the grace to look chastened; Worf folded his arms across his chest, scowling.

"Thank you," Riker said. "Our theory, please."

Terri spoke softly, directing her attention to the Klingon. "We think they were keeping you, Commander Riker and the others in a simulated womb; so the liquid you were placed in would be artificial amniotic fluid, the tubing taking the place of umbilical veins and arteries to carry on the functions of your body. The fluid would absorb the waste products such as urine, and keep you in optimum condition at the same time."

"Why should they do this?" Despite himself, Worf was curious.

"Before I was separated from Commander Riker and you, I noticed they don't seem to have any men. None that I could see anyway. I think you and the others were being kept to supply genetic material at some stage."

"And the purpose of those creatures in the other chamber?" he asked.

She considered. "Perhaps a genetic experiment they are conducting - for what purpose I can't guess."

Worf weighed up what Terri was saying, then queried, "What of this parasite you spoke of? What part does that play - we have yet to be provided with evidence of its existence."

"Yes," she agreed, "you have." She held her hands out; they shook slightly. Clenching them into fists, she wrapped her arms around her knees, dropping her head. Bleakly she said, "I killed someone."

"How?" Riker inquired gently.

"It was an accident. We were struggling - she fell on my knife. Then I went to try and find you."

"Take us there, Terri. We might find some information."

"I doubt it - I checked for myself before I came for you. But I'll take you there to see for yourselves - all right?" She rose to her feet.

Riker put a consoling arm around her shoulders. For a moment he thought she would accept the comfort he offered, but she gently removed his arm. "I'm fine, thank you, Commander. If I hadn't killed her, she would not have hesitated for a second to kill me. And you can't afford to have me weeping and wailing about things that are already unchangeable."

"If you are certain, Terri."

"I'm certain, thank you."

Riker said, "So, let's go find ourselves a corpse."

The room Terri had been detained in was much the same as when she had left it. There was, however, no sign of the dead woman.

"I swear," she said, "I left the body over here." She indicated a place tight up against the wall.

Worf watched her carefully. She was either an excellent actress, or (grudgingly he admitted this to himself) telling the truth. The Commander seemed inclined to trust her; she was very convincing. His instincts were also giving him a few problems; they insisted she was reliable.

Terri searched the room feverishly, as if the missing corpse would suddenly materialize somewhere else. "I don't know what's going on, but I left it there." Bending, she felt in her boot. "Look." She brandished the knife. "I didn't think of this before, but there's still blood on the blade."

Riker held his hand out, and Terri placed it in his palm, handle first. He was gratified to see what seemed to be dried blood on it, and he gave it to Worf, who scrutinized it.

Not impressed, the Klingon handed it back to Terri. "That could be anything," he pointed out, "and we have nothing with which we may check its authenticity."

Deflated, she acquiesced, "Indeed, we do not." Hunching her shoulders, she suggested, "As we have no evidence to establish whether I'm telling the truth, perhaps you should leave me here."

Riker ran a hand through his hair; he shook his head. "No. Your knowledge is required. If you are a spy - as Worf thinks - then you are sure going about getting us caught in a very peculiar way."

Worf, ever alert, heard people coming closer to the room they at present occupied. Pressing himself against the wall, he managed to open the door just far enough for him to see out to the corridor. Several females approached, talking animatedly among

themselves. They were now at the entrance. One of the women detached herself from the group; reaching the door, she raised her hand.

Worf grabbed the woman's wrist as it came through the opening. He pulled her into the room, and held her firmly in such a manner that she was unable to cry for assistance. He was surprised at the strength he needed to exert merely to restrain her.

Riker moved in to help; between them they managed to get her under control, without any damage to either her or them. Both of them saw for the first time the parasite that Terri had spoken so vehemently of.

The cowl of living flesh covering the woman's head glistened; mercurial, silvery, flowing life. Under the thin skin, they could see veins and arteries, a heart. It writhed, then seemed to shrink even as they watched.

Riker sat on his haunches, tentatively touching the argent thing with his fingertips. They slipped over the skin of the creature easily; it felt like silk. The woman started to struggle again. Worf tightened his grip on her arms, forcing them almost to breaking point behind her. She grunted with pain, but stopped her efforts to free herself.

Terri sank to her knees. "This is the woman I killed."

"You didn't do a thorough enough job," Worf commented.

"She wasn't breathing when I left - her heart wasn't beating either. She was dead!"

"She's not dead now."

"Enough!" Riker snapped, then to the woman, "Your name?"

When she spoke, her voice was low and sibilant, "My name is unimportant. You harm the companion."

Riker flicked a look at Terri, who was sitting next to him; she whispered, "That creature is the companion."

"So I gathered." Riker touched the companion again, and the woman writhed as if in pain.

"Cease," she muttered hoarsely. "Ask what you will. Hnr'uk'ri will not survive your touch."

"Who are you? What is the companion - this..." he pronounced the name carefully, "Hnr'uk'ri?"

"We were Catriona Flanagan," she gasped as he placed his fingers inadvertently on the creature. "It is the life giver."

"We?"

Terri said, "That is more or less what I got before."

"Perhaps," Worf enunciated carefully, "she needs a little more persuasion." He glanced hopefully at the Commander.

Riker considered Worf's suggestion seriously, then dismissed it

with a quick shake of his head. "I don't think it would help." He addressed Flanagan. "Was? Who are you now? Why is this the life giver?"

"We are unity, oneness; we are - " she produced a guttural sound from her throat and chest that Riker did not catch.

Terri grabbed his arm with excitement, comprehension suddenly exploding in her brain. "Not a parasite - a symbiont! A *symbiotic* relationship! That's got to be it."

"How did you make that intellectual leap?"

"The life giver!" she said. "This world is hostile to humanoids - what better way of surviving could there be? It probably enables them to metabolise native foodstuffs without harming them."

"But," Worf interrupted, "symbiosis is a state which requires some benefit for the symbiont."

"True," Terri agreed. "She said 'we' - perhaps her part of the bargain is sentience."

"And the companion heals any wounds, illnesses or other problems that its host might come across," Riker finished. "If your story is true, that is, Terri. Remarkable."

All three sat in silence, assessing what they now knew. The woman once known as Catriona Flanagan started to squirm in Worf's clasp again. He tightened his hold; as he did he accidentally came into contact with the companion. Flanagan seemed to shrink in on herself, the symbiont writhed in agony - she slumped into unconsciousness.

"What happened, Lieutenant?" Riker's voice carried surprise.

Worf felt as astonished as his commanding officer, "I touched it - " he indicated the symbiont - "for seconds only. How could that have affected them?"

Terri found herself the focus of attention once more. "I didn't notice any adverse affect when I came into contact with the Hnr'uk'ri - perhaps that's another reason for there not being any males." Overwhelmed by a sudden desire to needle the Klingon, she continued, "Then again, Worf, perhaps she was overwhelmed by your charisma."

Silence greeted this sally, so Terri went on, "We have another problem. You two gentlemen may have been supplied with all your nutritional needs while you were in the vats, but I was not so fortunate. I'm hungry."

Worf, rising to his not inconsiderable height, regarded Terri with distaste. Riker stood too, placing himself between them both.

He said reasonably, "I know I've mentioned this before, and I would prefer not to do so again. If you don't like each other, then that's fine, but let's keep our attention on one problem at a time. Namely, how to get out of this situation. Or do I have to make that an order?" At this last statement, his voice acquired a steely note.

Terri gave him a queer look. "Who said I didn't like Worf?"

Worf asked, "What has liking her got to do with it?"

Terri managed to bite off a further retort when she saw the irritated expression on Riker's face. "No, you don't have to make that an order." Glancing at the big Klingon, she added, "And I apologise if I've offended you." Worf grunted, so she assumed her apology was accepted. "Now can we find something to eat?"

They left the room with as little disturbance as possible, after making sure Flanagan was out of sight of any casual searcher.

This time as they left, they were noticed by an individual who followed at a safe distance on stealthy feet.

Captain's Log Supplemental: It has been thirty hours since Commander Riker and his away team were transported to Cho'a. In that time, we have had contact with them twice.

Counselor Troi assures me that all personnel remain unharmed, and I am able to report a change in status for Riker and Worf. Troi is certain they are restored to themselves, out of the situation in which they found themselves; whatever that might have been.

Commander Data and Lt. La Forge, working in conjunction, have come to the conclusion that whatever is blocking the Enterprise's scanners is, in all probability, mechanical. Considering the circumstances, which have forced them to undertake an almost impossible task, I have no hesitation in commending them both for their diligence.

Turning the chair he was sitting in, Picard faced Counselor Troi. Acknowledging her presence, he spoke quietly. "Is this an official visit as ship's psychologist?" He pointed out one of the chairs, indicating she should seat herself.

Troi, shaking her head, put a hand on the chair, picking at the stuff covering it. "No, not as Counselor, sir."

Eyeing her, Picard said, "Please, join me - you look most uncomfortable. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you, Captain."

Picard went over to the food slot. "Tea. Earl Grey, hot." Removing the cup, he seated himself across from Troi, who appeared deep in thought. "Now, how might I help you?"

Startled back to everyday surroundings, Troi raised troubled eyes. "Captain, when Dr. Goodall came aboard, I wasn't able to feel her the way I feel others."

Picard, crossing his legs, sipped his tea. "So?"

Troi, gathering her racing mind, went on, "She slipped from me. She was a mirror, reflecting me back to myself. Sometimes I caught a feeling of duality; as though there was more than one

ego." Deanna shook her head, "Then it would go - as if it had never been - leaving a taste, an echo... I thought I'd imagined it."

"Where is this leading us, Counselor?"

"I didn't have much to do with her... I'm sorry, Captain - did you say something?"

Picard grunted, "I said 'Thank God for that!'"

"Oh?" Troi caught a glimpse of annoyance quickly extinguished. "Now she is back on Cho'a, I don't get even the mirror effect. Nothing. And I should have realized this before - there is nothing from the colonists either! I sense only our people - poorly. The exception is Commander Riker and his companions. They feel worried."

Picard, setting his cup down on the table with a firm click, faced her. "Why haven't you reported this before now?"

"Sir, I wasn't looking for it - so I didn't notice it. I can give no other reason." Troi continued, "But... sometimes... I get a repeat of that echo. Faintly. That duality. Not from Goodall," she said hastily, catching his eyes. "No, from minds that are not so adept as hers. Children, I think."

Picard sat back. "Carry on, please."

Words tumbling from her, Troi spoke with conviction. "I believe we are dealing with more than a Human colony, and that there are intelligent aliens present on Cho'a. It is my opinion we have been misled by Dr. Goodall and her cohorts - all of us. Including the Federation."

Picard rubbed his eyes tiredly. "A first contact situation? Is that what you are proposing?"

"Yes."

"A new species, living in close association with Humans, which does not want to be found. Which - " Picard could see she wanted to say more - "Counselor?"

"Which seems to be distinctly unfriendly, Captain."

"Ah. You reached that conclusion how?"

Deanna thought carefully before answering, "The echo contained revulsion - yes, definitely revulsion."

Picard was silent for a few moments as he weighed the information. "I see."

"Sir?"

"Our staff are still in one piece?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case, Counselor," Picard said, "I am still reluctant to do more at present." He held up a hand as she started to protest. "If you are correct, and this is indeed a first contact, we must tread carefully. By your own admission, they do not want to

be found - we can't go in 'guns blazing'."

"No," she agreed softly.

"Deanna," he said kindly, leaning towards her. "I know you are worried about Will. He will be fine - I have confidence the away team will find a way out of their situation and resolve this other question."

Troi presented him with a view of the top of her head, twisting her hands in her lap. He regarded her, saying, "Data, Mr. La Forge, a staff meeting in five minutes. Shall we go?"

Deanna followed Captain Picard through the doors; with this she would have to be content for the moment.

Worf chewed on a piece of meat - even he didn't care for it raw. Terri and Riker ate in silence also. Beside them sat an elderly man: dirty, unkempt, skeletal; sitting on haunches that were quivering with the effort of remaining still. He gnawed on a bone with noisy relish, making loud slurping noises as he sucked at the marrow; cracking the bone with a small stone to get to it. He reeked.

The three of them had gradually become aware of being followed, and Worf had been waiting for his moment when the old man appeared. How the Klingon had managed to miss the sound of footfalls, Riker did not understand - he could only suppose that Worf was still riled by Terri's not very subtle jibes. The Klingon's captive had indicated they were to follow him, using a combination of signs and language. He seemed quite insane, saliva flecking his lips. Riker had decided their best option would be to accept the new member of the party as the guide he seemed to want to be. The result had been this meal which had obviously been trapped earlier. Their new guide had refused point blank to supply them with any means of cooking.

The Klingon declined the offer of further meat with a low growl; Terri shook her head when it made its way to her. Riker refused also, watching with horrified fascination as the old man chomped, chewing vigorously. Noisily he licked specks from gnarled fingers, and drank blood which collected in a bowl placed under the animal's throat.

Finally he belched loudly, and grinned, "A fine coney - yes?"

The 'coney' happened to weigh approximately twenty kilos and had sharp predatory teeth and claws as well as the more familiar long ears of a terrestrial rabbit. At one time, Terri supposed, it might have looked rabbitlike. Exposure to Cho'a's inhospitable ecology had hurried the engineered animal's evolution to ensure a better chance of survival. Fortunately for them, it was still edible.

Shifting position slightly, Riker agreed, "Excellent."

The old man stared with mad eyes at the Commander, licking thin, bloodless lips, and rubbing hands like spiders across blood smeared thighs. Long white hands - fingers splayed at the tips, nails encrusted with filth. Cackling inanely, he scurried past the three of them, watching to see if they were following.

Worf got to his feet, padding after him with a predatory expression. The other two got up too, following the Klingon

He led them through a maze of tunnels, one looking much like another, the walls merging into sameness. He went on for kilometres, stopping occasionally to check on their progress. Finally, at the edge of an underground lake, he ran up and down muttering to himself.

Riker cautioned Worf, when the Klingon seemed about to grab the man, to patience. "Let him. He's been useful this far."

Worf made a low sound deep in his chest, but nodded curtly at Riker. Standing still, he watched with burning eyes; it was too much. "Sir, I... "

"Nothing, Lieutenant - you will do nothing." Riker's tone was firm.

The old man waded into the water at last, striking out strongly for the opposite bank. Riker said, "Seems we go over."

"Great," said Terri. "There's just a tiny problem." Worf and Riker turned to face her as she went on, "I swim like a brick."

Worf sighed irritably and Riker made a soft exclamation of dismay. She regarded the water with evident distaste.

"You don't swim," Riker said.

"Got it in one," Terri murmured, then more clearly, "bit of a nuisance, isn't it."

They all watched their self-appointed guide stop to tread water as he turned in the lake so he could see whether they were coming.

Worf grumbled, "I'll carry you across." Wading to thigh depth, and without further preamble, he said, "Terri, come here - do not struggle. You must relax."

Riker said, "Do as he says, Terri. Worf is better at this than me."

Terri waded to Worf, doing what he instructed without comment. Once in deeper water, he supported her by placing one of his arms firmly around her, holding her head clear as he swam. Reaching the shallows on the other side, he righted himself and, feeling his way to safer ground, he let her go.

Riker joined them on the bank. He looked at Terri who was wringing out her hair. "Was it as bad as you thought?"

Sniffing, Terri continued to untangle her hair. "Not so bad," she agreed. "Thank you, Worf."

Worf inclined his head very slightly in acknowledgement, then he said, "Sir, the old man is waiting for us to continue."

"Mustn't keep him, then." Riker grabbed Terri by the hand, pulling her onwards. "No time for beauty treatment, Terri."

Stung, Terri opened her mouth to let loose a vitriolic tirade concerning Riker's immediate ancestry.

"Impressive," Worf commented.

"Isn't she," remarked Riker dryly. "It's not true, though."

They followed the old man on and on. Halting at last before an enormous opening, he jiggled a little dance of ecstasy, spinning and singing in a frail warble.

Riker looked past him into the opening. Before them stretched a cavern, as large as the first had been. Here, though, there was no sign of Human occupation; the place was bare, except for Cho'an flora. He could see some animal life moving across his field of vision. He hoped it was friendly.

The old man set off again, at a speed that defied his apparent age. The two officers and the scientist had to pick up their heels to keep up with him.

He led them to a small stream which ran from a small outcropping of rocks. Throwing himself down, he drank from it, then with water still dripping from his sparse grey beard, he ordered, "You - now!"

The three companions glanced at one another. Riker bent down to taste the water, signalling that the other two do the same. The water tasted fine; cold, clear and sweet. His stomach clamoured for more.

"A diet of raw meat and water," Terri muttered, "will kill us all slowly - probably of intense boredom. Have either of you spotted a bush with some purplish fruits?"

Worf finished scooping a drink in his hand, shaking the drops remaining on his fingers free. "Describe it."

"About a metre high. Rectangular leaves with a thick integument; spiny growth on stems. Greenish/lilac in colour."

"Like that?" the Klingon asked, and pointed.

Riker and Worf watched with interest as Terri went to the bush indicated. Cautiously, she plucked as many of the fruit as she could, holding the stems and taking care not to touch the skin. As they dropped on the ground, the skin split revealing succulent green flesh which smelt sweet and fragrant even at a distance.

Finding gloves in her pack, she peeled the skin away completely. Carefully, she made sure it did not contaminate the flesh. She offered the fruit to Riker and Worf.

Taking a bite, Riker was unprepared for the attack on his tastebuds. It was neither too sweet nor too sour, and there was a spicy aftertaste. Surprisingly good, it assuaged the dim feelings of disquiet his digestive tract had been giving him.

After they had finished their impromptu meal, the madman nodded his head vigorously in approval, saying, "Hl'tae bush. Good, good, good." He clapped his hands. "Go now."

He set off again, jogging effortlessly, the away team barely managing to keep up with him. Only Worf did not show signs of distress as the punishing pace continued; the Humans were becoming increasingly weary.

"How much further?" Riker gasped. He did not expect a reply.

"Here - now," their guide stated, stopping dead in his tracks.

Riker and Worf shared a glance, then looked about themselves with no great interest. There was very little to differentiate where they were from where they had been.

Terri drew their attention to the peculiarity. "Can you smell it? Ozone - there's a force field here!"

Worf took a deep breath, then exhaled. "I believe you are correct." He set about searching for it, soon coming across the resistance that indicated where it began.

Pressing firmly, he and Riker were mystified when the field did not stop them as they had expected; it gave like latex, moulding itself to them first, then popping like a soap bubble.

"Fascinating," Terri breathed. She had come with them. "I've heard of force fields like this, that allow things through if they're a particular size or shape - but programmed to keep out anything else."

Riker took stock of the area. "What's this?"

The mad man danced just outside their circle, singing his weird song. He stooped, gathering one of the glittering items strewn about the ground. He extended his hand to show them. "Wild ones." He caressed it.

Terri jumped, then, impelled, she grasped his hand. Dropping it, she knelt to pick up one of the items; stood, and held her own hand out for them to see. As Riker and Worf watched, the jewel on her hand changed. It became fluid, a seed of luminescent life reaching with tiny pseudo-arms, trying to bury itself in her flesh. With a sound of disgust she tried to shake it loose, but was unable to. Worf took her arm and pulled at the symbiont with hard fingers - he was gratified to see his touch seemed to be having the same effect it had had on Catriona Flanagan. This time, the tiny symbiont crumbled into dust before their eyes.

Riker picked up his own sample. After a few seconds of being in place on his hand, it too crumbled into dust, the rainbow of colours fleeing first.

"It's a nursery," said Terri.

"A nursery?" repeated Riker.

"Well, look around," Terri said. "These are all small specimens - there is nothing larger than a pebble." She stopped, saying at last, "You recognise them, don't you?"

"Yes." Riker strode to the old man, who skipped away out of his reach. "Dammit - Worf, get him!"

The Klingon, who had been eagerly waiting for the opportunity, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as he strayed to close. None too gently, Worf held him out at arm's length, giving a shake for good measure. "Time to start talking, old one," he advised.

"We want information, Worf," Riker reminded the over-zealous

security officer. "It might be better if you let him breath now and again."

Worf curled his lip, but relaxed his fingers a little, saying, "Talk - now." Intrigued, he saw the madness in the man's eyes draining away, craftiness becoming the dominant expression.

"Who are you?" Terri asked.

The man laughed at her, so Worf reminded him who had the upper hand by squeezing slightly. "Answer her."

Riker came closer, "I repeat - who are you?"

"Let me down - I'll tell you what you want to know."

Riker said, "Worf, put him down. Don't free him though."

"I had no intention of releasing him yet, Commander," Worf stated. He set the man on his feet, being careful to retain a firm hold on his arms.

"Well?" Riker waited impatiently.

The old man started to speak. "My name is Devron Goodall. I am Marie Goodall's grandson."

Worf growled; all restraint on his precarious temper fled. "This is a blatant lie. Allow me to reach the truth of the matter."

"Worf," Terri said, "let's hear him out before we do anything drastic. Then if we think he's lying, I'll try to persuade the Commander to let you have him." She spoke earnestly.

Narrowing his eyes with patent disbelief, Worf searched her face. What he saw there surprised him - so he drew his anger back into a tight hot knot in the pit of his guts. "Very well."

Riker gave Terri a grateful look, and went on, "You can't be Dr. Goodall's grandson, she is only sixty-three. Your real name - now!"

"My name is as I stated. I am Marie Goodall's grandson." He winced as Worf tightened his hold, blurting out, "The Hnr'uk'ri are symbiotic... "

"We know that already," Worf snarled into his ear. "We want to hear something we don't."

Devron Goodall tried to oblige him. "The relationship increases Human longevity - but they are only compatible with females. Marie Goodall is one of the last survivors of the original scientific team on the 'Azure Lady'."

"That would make Marie one hundred and seventy-six years old." Terri was sceptical. "She's the same age as you."

Devron sniggered. "She didn't age when joined with the companion - she has now because they're dormant away from Cho'a."

"I don't believe you," Terri said flatly.

Riker asked, "What about the other men? Are you the only one?"

"Yes. They bred for me. I was their last attempt to get a male compatible with the Hnr'uk'ri."

"They bred you?" Terri asked.

"The Hnr'uk'ri are unable to associate with males because of the dis-symmetry - the 'XY' arrangement."

The away team exchanged glances.

Worf said, "What were the Hnr'uk'ri originally?"

Shrugging, Devron continued, "Highly specialised viruses, taking and inserting D.N.A. to suit themselves. Over the millennia, they evolved side by side with a host species, offering the benefits you know from the Human population. When 'Azure Lady' arrived, the Hnr'uk'ri took advantage of the new ecological niche. Humans could live here in reasonable comfort, while the companions got greater intelligence without the need to evolve their own to a higher level."

Silently, they absorbed the information. Terri spoke first, hesitantly. "There are still so many unanswered questions. Commander, what should we do now?"

Riker considered his options - go back to answer those questions the hard way, or get to the Enterprise. "We go home. Back to the Enterprise. There are holes in the information the ship's computer would help us resolve."

"What about him?" Worf gave Devron a jerk.

"We'll bring him back with us," Riker said firmly. "He will show us the way out of here, and he's probably got more use than just a guide."

"You heard the Commander," Worf grated harshly. "Get moving."

The Klingon and his prisoner started off back towards the force field. From this side, its presence was clear from the way the air shifted slightly. Worf and Devron went through without waiting for Riker and Terri.

Terri set off after them, but Riker stopped her, saying, "You seem to have developed a way of handling Worf suddenly."

She was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You allowed him to believe we'd give him free rein with Devron."

"Oh, that." Terri became thoughtful. "I meant it, Commander."

She marched away, leaving Riker staring after her with a perplexed expression. He brought himself back from his thoughts, and followed.

Jean-Luc Picard lay on top of his bed trying to ease some of the discomfort in the back of his neck. His shoulder and neck muscles were so tight they felt as if he could bounce a baseball bat off them and not even notice!

Groaning with the effort he was having to put into relaxing, he finally gave it up as a bad job, then sat on the side of the bed. He stood and walked out of the room into the living area.

Picard wandered over to the computer console sitting on the desk, and started to make some notations in his personal log. He *started* to make notations, but found his thoughts were racing too fast for adequate concentration. Frustrated with himself, Picard banged his fist sharply on the table top.

As if on cue, a call came through for him. It was Data. Relieved by the opportunity to get back to work, Picard answered with more than a trace of eagerness, which he quickly suppressed. "Commander?"

"Sir," the android started, "Lt. La Forge and I believe we have the answer to the problem regarding the scanners."

"Excellent. I will meet both of you in the observation lounge."

"Aye, sir," Data said, and the communication ceased.

Picard knew he need not have concerned himself - this was the best crew in the fleet, after all.

La Forge, Data and O'Brien were already seated when he arrived. Picard moved quickly to the head of the table and sat regarding his senior officers gravely. "Lt. La Forge." He nodded at the Chief of Engineering. "If you would begin your theory, please." Picard leaned back in the chair, supporting his head on one hand, and prepared himself for a lengthy explanation.

La Forge came forward, putting his arms on the table. He meshed his fingers together in thought. "As you know, sir, we were unable to get a fix on any life readings for humanoids within a specific area, and Data and I speculated that the problem might be manufactured rather than natural."

Picard tilted his head to the side. "Carry on."

"That premise has proved correct. On consultation with Counselor Troi, we managed to glean a few clues about what was going on down there."

"Really?" Picard's interest was piqued.

At a glance from La Forge, Data took up the story. "Yes, Captain. Counselor Troi's observations proved extremely useful - they enabled us to realise what we were 'seeing' was not really there at all." The android paused momentarily, then carried on, "Her report told us about a 'mirror' effect she received empathically from Dr. Goodall - that was our first clue."

Picard's expression became thoughtful. "The field, or whatever it is down there, operates on those parameters."

"Exactly," agreed Data. "It blocked our instruments by masquerading as the surrounding terrain." Data paused again, "Remarkable technology, sir. We have come across nothing quite like this before."

"Indeed?" The Captain's tone was dry. "This is very interesting, but how do we pinpoint anything with accuracy?"

"We have to synchronize the frequencies our scanners are transmitted on to those the field emits. It is chameleon-like in that whatever frequency we send at it, it changes its own to counteract with ours. We will have to operate within a very small margin, with little room for error."

"Can you do something about that, gentlemen?" Picard asked quietly.

La Forge and Data nodded their heads as one.

"Good." He turned his attention to O'Brien. "I presume you have something to report to me also, Chief?"

O'Brien said carefully, "I've found a way of 'punching' a hole through the field. That will enable us to get a grip on our people and get them back up to the ship. It will involve a few minor modifications to the transporter system, and putting the transportees into 'hold' for approximately ten minutes."

Picard came forward in the chair, placing his elbows on the table. "Excellent work," he approved. Three faces turned towards him expectantly. "Make it so."

Devron Goodall led the way. Close behind him came Worf; Terri and Riker took up the rear.

Terri felt exhausted. Her feet and legs ached; they had been walking forever - at least, that was how it seemed. "Ask him how much further," she said.

Worf replied, "Ask him yourself."

Devron, who had been listening, smirked. "Not far now. Just to go up."

"Up?" repeated Worf.

"I think he means to the surface, Worf," Terri said.

Worf growled, "How, Goodall?"

The old man indicated a tunnel similar to all the others they had been up, down and through. "Up!"

Riker approached the mouth of the tunnel, peering into it. It was very steep, and fairly smooth. "How are you at climbing?" He addressed Terri.

"Well..." She joined him. "Fair to awful. Climbing is not that useful a skill to a xenobiologist."

"Neither is knowing how to use a flick-knife," Riker pointed out.

"I'll agree to differ about that. You don't know why I had to learn."

"Why?"

"Marie thought it would be a good idea to take an adolescent to some of the seedier areas on the planets she visited. I either learned to take care of myself, or..." she trailed off.

"I see." Then he said, "I'll go first, Devron with me. Worf can go last, behind you. That way, if you fall, he'll be able to catch you - and we won't be slowed down too much."

"Thanks very much," Terri said sarcastically.

Worf pushed the elderly Human to Riker, and they both disappeared into the opening. Small pieces of shale crumbled away as the Commander put the toe of his boot in a small crevice; fingers searching, he found another fissure, and hauled himself up. There was more lichen on the walls, gently lighting what seemed to be a fairly well-worn pathway. He became suspicious. "What else uses this tunnel, Goodall?"

"Long gone," came the muffled reply from behind him.

"You'd better be right," Riker muttered. The last thing they needed was to be trapped in here while something, either poisonous or deadly in some other way, could get to them.

Meanwhile, Worf pushed Terri ahead of him, then climbed in himself. All four concentrated on climbing - Terri slipped only twice, and both times the Klingon managed to catch her.

They emerged into the bright blue sunlight of Cho'a's parent, and they stood there blinking. They had come out on top of a group of hills which were surrounded on all sides by scrubby and unappealing plant growth. In the distance could be heard the sound of animals. It was a savage, brutal roaring that seemed to be moving towards them rapidly.

"Another predator?" Riker regarded Terri, and waited.

"You can bet your boots, Commander."

"Just great," he grumbled. "Right - " Riker grabbed Devron - "you got us here. Now where?"

The old man pointed mutely at another lumpy rock formation. Riker shoved him over to Worf, who caught him. "Take care of that."

Worf held Devron firmly once more, and together they made their way to the place indicated, Terri close behind.

Terri listened to the roaring. "It's getting closer - much closer."

Arriving at the outcropping, Riker made his way around it curiously. As the others joined him, he said, "This is man-made."

Devron, grinning, reached forward to the surface of the rock, touching it. The rock simply became transparent, then popped out of existence, leaving a clean, bright metallic object. A seam appeared in the otherwise unblemished surface, two doors coming into existence where there had been none previously. Each slid noiselessly open, a spartan interior lighting up.

"You first," growled Worf, thrusting the unresisting Devron through. When nothing seemed to be going to happen to him, the others also entered. The opening shut, but not before they heard the smash of whatever had decided to hunt them against it. Turning, just to ensure there was no danger, Worf felt a spasm of shock go through him. Mirror-bright on the exterior, the walls were transparent from the inside, and he could see something with claws, purple tongue, and prehensile tail repeatedly attempting to breach the entrance. Venom oozed across the surface as the thing spat its fury about a meal just missed, and behind it, mouths dripping with saliva, were more of the creatures.

Beside him, Terri remarked, "A close shave."

Worf looked down at her. "Yes."

From further in, Riker shouted, "Worf, Terri, come here."

Entering the area where the Commander was standing, they were pleasantly surprised. Although the technology was of the same level they had encountered before, they could see immediately what it was.

Worf joined Riker. "Transporter system?"

Riker nodded. "Our way back. All we've got to do now is find out how to work it."

Jerking a thumb at Devron, Worf said, "Perhaps he knows."

Devron remained silent, and waited.

Riker faced the old man. "Well - do you?"

For an answer, he moved to one of the instrument panels, running fingers across the smooth surface. Less than five metres from them, a shaft of light appeared, then faded. Devron, changing position, reached towards a blue panel, touching it briefly. "There." He gave a satisfied grunt, and stepped back.

A lilac-tinted viewscreen appeared; on it they could see the Enterprise's main transporter room.

"Fascinating." Riker was impressed; so was Worf.

"How do we use it?" asked Terri as she dragged her eyes away from the screen with an effort.

"Just press here, and here." Devron showed them two more panels. "First blue, then purple."

"Right." Riker thought for a second. "Worf, take him and I'll operate the controls. We have to make sure he's telling the truth, don't we?"

Devron uttered a squeal when Worf gripped his upper arm ruthlessly. "No, no - we must go through together."

"Oh?" Riker's face was grim.

Worf squeezed his arm again to make him talk. "Touch the red pentagram - it fixes the area."

Terri and Worf waited as Riker set the pentagram, and at a trot

all four moved as one to where the light had been. It came on them suddenly - there was a strange dissonant feel to this alien machine, making them disorientated so they were unable for a moment to realise they were on the Enterprise. Almost immediately, the ship's computer started the alert klaxon, and in response several security officers arrived promptly, and skidded to a halt. Then they snapped to attention as they realised their superior officer and First Officer Riker were now back aboard.

Acknowledging them fleetingly, Riker dragged Devron with him as he touched the wall panel. "Computer, the whereabouts of Captain Picard."

"Behind you, Number One," said a voice.

Riker swung round, and grinned. Captain Picard answered him with a smile of his own, and beside him stood Troi, who also smiled.

"Welcome home, Commander, Lt. Worf. I'm relieved to see you both." Picard's expression changed when he noticed Devron. He acknowledged Terri with a brisk, "Dr. Walsh."

"Sir," Worf interrupted.

"Yes, Worf?"

"Permission to place *this* - " Worf could not keep the disgust from his voice - "in sickbay."

Picard spared a curious glance for Worf, "Permission granted." As the Klingon left with his staff in formation behind him, the Captain said to Riker, "Who is that? I gather Worf doesn't care for him greatly?"

Terri snorted.

"You've something to say, Dr. Walsh?" Picard said.

Terri raised her hands. "No, nothing. If I could go to my cabin, Captain - I would appreciate a shower, and something to eat and drink." She paused meaningfully. "I think we all would."

"Doctor, we shall need to debrief you as soon as possible."

Terri faced the Captain. "Fine - at your pleasure. I'm not going anywhere - unless it's to bed." And with that she went.

Picard stared after her. "I take it it hasn't been an easy task, Will."

"So easy it went like clockwork," Riker stated. He shared a wry look with Picard.

"Hmm. You do seem to need tidying up."

"Have I got time to clean up?" Riker sounded hopeful.

"Yes, Number One. As soon as you are ready, collect Dr. Walsh and Worf, and join us."

"Aye, sir," Riker said. He smiled at Troi, who was waiting for a chance to speak to him herself.

Turning his head slightly, Picard added, "Oh, Will - take yourselves to sickbay for a check-over. You've been gone long enough to require it." He left.

Riker offered his arm to Troi. "Shall we go?"

"Counselor, would you give us your report on Devron Goodall," Picard asked.

"Of course," replied Troi.

"Is he telling the truth?" Riker said.

Troi nodded her head. "Yes. As you know, he is not quite sane - it makes my reading of him difficult, but he is telling the truth as far as he can."

As the room became quiet, Terri entered and took a seat opposite Data. She examined each of the faces turned towards her with interest. She inquired, "Where is Devron Goodall?"

"Still in sickbay," Worf replied.

Picard interrupted, "Commander Riker and Worf have already told us of their experiences. Do you have anything further to add, Dr. Walsh?"

Terri exchanged a look with Riker. Slightly puzzled, she said, "What they know, I know - and the other way round. Why?"

Picard rose, tugging his uniform into place. "This story of longevity - how credible do you find it?"

Terri shook her head firmly, "I *don't* find it credible. Life expectancy has increased with technological and medical advancements, of course. But to live over a century with no sign of aging? Coming it a little too strong for me."

"Data, please would you show Dr. Walsh the information you have retrieved from the archives."

Data said, "Computer, display hologram of Dr. Marie Goodall." In the table centre, the form of a woman took shape. "That is your mother?" the android asked.

"Yes," said Terri.

"Display archive hologram; personnel 'Azure Lady', Dr. Marie Goodall and Geophysicist Catriona Flanagan."

Obediently, two more figures sprang up to stand beside the first. Terri stared at them. It was obvious the Flanagan they had come across was the same as the illustration before them; just as obvious was that the two Marie Goodalls were one and the same person, something that would not be apparent unless access to the information in front of them was available.

Terri's mouth thinned. "I was wrong."

Data ordered the computer to cease the display, and Picard drew up behind his chair. Placing a hand on the back of the chair, the

Captain went on, "Something else has come to light in the course of Data's investigations."

Picard raised his head and spoke again. "The deaths of your parents occurred in a laboratory accident - correct?"

Curiously, Terri eyed him. "Yes. I was very young - four or five."

"Dr. Walsh, we now have reason to believe that your parents were murdered."

Terri laughed. "By Marie?"

"Yes."

Seeing he was serious, Terri frowned. "What possible motive could she have had?"

"You."

"Me!" Terri laughed again. "Ridiculous."

Data continued, "We have reason to believe you were genetically engineered to suit the Hnr'uk'ri - and that you were not the only construct she contrived. Amongst the equipment listed for the science team was a small, transportable cryogenic container. We think these others were held within this."

Everybody swivelled in their chairs to look at her. Terri's face froze, her eyes became polished jade, and her voice dropped an octave as she forced the words out in clipped, precise tones. "My turn to ask - what proof have you?"

The android met her eyes, and went on. "Dr. Crusher found some interesting chromosomal arrangements after she had taken the routine blood. It caused her to look more carefully at some of the other samples. Dr. Walsh - you are not completely Human."

Troi gave a sudden cry; the rage from Terri was incandescent - it burned white-hot, consuming Troi, leaving her a hollow shell. Outwardly, Walsh was cold and efficient - the stark contrast chilled Troi to the bone.

Terri turned her ferocious eyes on the Counselor. "I apologise for inconveniencing you." Then she stood, and went to the door.

"Where are you going, Doctor?" asked Picard.

Terri stopped, and without turning, she said, "To my quarters." She walked out, her back stiff.

"Worf," ordered Picard, "make sure she does not leave her cabin."

Riker sat back slowly in his chair. "Quite a revelation, Data."

"It was not one she seemed to want," reflected the android.

La Forge was still, then he said, "Captain, that lady was mad as hell - she could do anything."

"I'm sure Worf will be more than capable of handling the good Doctor, should she require it."

Under his breath, so only Troi caught his words, Riker said, "I wouldn't bet on it."

Worf waited for a few moments outside Terri's quarters, but she did not seem to be there. He tried again - with no luck.

"Security over-ride." He stepped through the now open doors into darkness, and promptly tripped over one of her pot plants. Muttering an oath, he kicked the shards of pot out of his way, and asked the computer to supply some light.

Once he could see, he scanned the room, and found her sitting, legs crossed, hands resting lightly on her knees, on the floor. She seemed to be asleep, so he approached her quietly.

Terri's eyes snapped open. "Worf?"

The Klingon said, "What are you doing?"

Rising with feline grace, Terri said, "I could ask the same of you." She noticed the broken pot, and peat strewn over the floor. Bending, she scooped some of the mess up, and started to tidy. "I gather you are responsible for this."

Worf shrugged. "An accident. I repeat, what were you doing?"

"Meditating."

The Klingon watched as she continued to sweep the mess into her hands, placing the pieces of broken pot carefully within each other. "You are angry."

It was a statement of fact, and Terri straightened to glare at him. "Now what," she grated, "gave you that impression?"

Worf ignored the sarcasm, folding his arms across his chest, and continued to regard her steadily. With a small sigh, Terri said, "You've been ordered to watch me, I take it." As she received no answer, she went on, "Would you take me to see Devron?"

"No."

"Why?"

"My orders were to ensure you stayed here," Worf said.

"I see." Terri crossed to a set of drawers, opening it and taking something small into her hand. "In that case, why don't we pass the time more convivially. Please take a seat - you're making the place untidy."

Worf became wary. What was she up to? "No, thank you."

From the food-slot, Terri removed a drink, then sat. She watched Worf closely, "You know, you really know how to lurk effectively - did it take much practise?"

Worf felt his temper starting to rise - he made a move for the

doors to wait in the corridor, when her voice stopped him.

"Don't go, Worf. I - I apologise for that last remark. It was uncalled for." Terri sounded contrite. "You just happened to be here at the wrong time."

"Even so," he said, "I shall wait in the corridor."

"Do you have to? I would welcome someone to talk to. It's not every day you find all your cherished notions about yourself go up in smoke."

"It does no good to dwell on such matters," Worf said. "What is - is."

"Probably." But she did not sound sure at all. Lapsing into silence, she looked at Worf speculatively, then smiled brilliantly. Rising, she went towards him, and reached a hand to his face. "I really do like you."

Worf caught her wrist just as her hand touched him. "I do not respond to blandishments."

Standing on her toes, Terri's face came very close, and she looked him in the eye. "Good." Her other hand stole around his neck. "Because," she said sweetly, "I'm not about to make any."

Something sharp jabbed Worf in the back of his neck, in one of the minor veins, and with an exclamation of rage he pushed her violently away. "What have you done?"

Terri, from her position on the floor, eyed him carefully. "A drug to induce paralysis of the voluntary muscles. Unfortunately, it is most effective on Humans and Vulcans. I'm not certain how long you will be incapacitated. I hope it'll be long enough for me to get to Cho'a, and - " a savage smile transfigured her face - "Marie."

Worf slipped helplessly down the wall, and Terri came over to him. Picking up one of his hands, and letting it fall, she grunted with satisfaction. "I really do regret this, Worf - there is no-one I'd sooner have in a tight spot than you. But I'm sure *you* can understand what I must do - and why."

Worf fumed helplessly as she gathered a few items together and placed them in a bag. Then, crouching, she removed the phaser from his waist. "In case you are adversely affected by this, I've left some information for Dr. Crusher, and the vial on the table." She smiled again, and left.

On the bridge the red alert klaxon began to shrill in earnest - the computer shouting its message over and over. "Intruder in main transporter room."

"Security!" Riker demanded.

Picard stared at his First Officer. "Where the hell is Worf?"

Worf had been paralysed for no more than twenty minutes - at

Least that was what his time sense told him - when the alert sounded. He managed to struggle to his feet, and tried to shake the effects of the drug. As he started to grope his way to the doors, his communicator beeped.

"Worf?" Riker's voice was sharp.

"Sir," the Klingon responded groggily. "I'm on my way." Moving through the doors, he began to run, until he could feel the drug no longer gripped him.

Five of his officers joined him, and they all raced towards the transporter room. Worf seized a phaser from one of them, and ran full pelt into the room, followed closely by his men, to see Terri standing on the platform.

Acting more on instinct than thought, Worf charged her, and found he too was caught in the transporter beam.

Rushing to where his superior officer had been, Ensign Taylor slid to a halt, then tapped his combadge, taking in as he did so the unconscious form of Chief O'Brien.

"Security to sickbay - Dr. Crusher to main transporter room." Pausing, he continued, "Captain Picard, Ensign Taylor reporting for Lt. Worf. Main transporter damaged, and O'Brien injured. Lt. Worf and Dr. Walsh are presumed on planet surface." He acknowledged a sign from one of the others. "I confirm that, sir."

Picard swore, then sighed. "On my way, Ensign."

Terri and Worf materialised, were carried forward by the momentum of the Klingon's rush, and landed in a heap, Terri trapped under Worf. She struggled under his weight for a moment, then lay still.

Finally, she rasped, "Get off me, you big bastard - you're suffocating me."

Worf growled at her furiously, but shifted his weight to allow her a little more freedom. "You," he snarled, "are treacherous."

"And you," she retorted, "didn't think."

Taken aback, Worf had to agree. "No, I did not."

Terri pushed at him, and he stood and pulled her up too. He held on to her tightly by the shoulders, digging his fingers into the flesh. Terri faced him. "Not that it would have helped - I've sabotaged the transporters."

"All of them?" Worf was sceptical.

"Yes."

He released her, and his mouth thinned as he regarded her. He picked the phaser he had dropped from the ground, slipping it back to its correct position. "What do you have in mind?"

Terri said, "I want to throw the biggest spanner I can into this set up." Her eyes became hard. "A spot of revenge wouldn't

come amiss, either." She glanced around. "Your transporter chief is to be congratulated - he really knows his job. I hope I didn't hurt him too badly."

"Where do you want to start?" Worf asked

"I thought I would get to those machines we saw in that antechamber, and phaser them. I have a hunch they supply the force field, and then you should be able to contact the ship."

"If we don't get stopped first," Worf pointed out.

She glanced around to get her bearings, then ducked out of sight as two people came very close to where they stood. "That way."

Worf spared a small part of his attention for the place he had found himself, but, as it was not an area he could claim familiarity with, dismissed it to rely on Terri as a guide.

They jogged, keeping up a steady pace, and took advantage of the shadows cast by the buildings which leaned together closely.

"There," Terri whispered.

Worf followed her as she crept furtively along the edge of a wall. She stopped. "If we can get to the turbolift, it'll take us straight to the antechamber."

They both watched the traffic of people for a little while, waiting for a suitable moment to get to the lift. When there was a lull, Terri said, "Now or never." She ran, brushing aside a startled woman, who set up a hue and cry. Worf reached the lift a split second before Terri, and pulled her in.

The doors shut on them, and the lift started to move upwards. Worf glared at Terri, who shifted uncomfortably. "What's the matter?"

Worf stared at the far wall over her head. "I do not enjoy running away."

Terri sighed. "In the face of overwhelming odds, I would say running is pretty good defensively. I don't want my epitaph to read 'She Was Very Stupid'."

"I did not say I couldn't understand - only that I didn't like it."

She laughed at him. "Sorry, Worf - I did not understand the distinction. I stand corrected."

They came to a halt, and passed into the antechamber.

Worf removed his phaser, checking the setting. He said, "Please take cover over there." Making sure she obeyed first, he then took up a stance beside her, and got down on one knee. He took aim and fired; the first machine made a satisfying explosion, as did the next and the next. Worf ran the phaser across the banks of machinery with thoroughness, until he could not see any longer because of the smoke.

Terri had a fit of coughing, but shared a grin with Worf, whose

own face had acquired an expression that might be termed a smile. It showed all his teeth, and it disappeared as rapidly as it had arrived.

Worf touched his communicator. "Worf to Enterprise."

A moment passed with no reply, and then, "Worf, you're with Dr. Walsh?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, looking at Terri. "I have destroyed some apparatus. Has this opened the way for our sensors?"

"Data is scanning now," Picard said.

The android's voice sounded. "Yes, Lieutenant. I have been able to locate you and Dr. Walsh." Data became silent, "I must inform you that you will have company in 55 seconds. Five persons, two bearing weapons."

Worf growled, "Two to beam up."

"I regret," said Data, "that that is not possible at the moment. Dr. Walsh was most efficient. Repairs will be effected in thirty minutes."

Picard said, "I'm sorry, Worf. You are on your own for the time being. We'll be with you as soon as we can."

Worf glowered furiously at Terri, who shrugged. "At least they'll be able to get to us now."

"That is not a helpful observation," Worf concluded.

Even as they spoke, the five people they had been warned of came out of the smoke towards them. A tall figure detached herself, and spoke. "Theresa, come."

O'Brien took his head out of the innards of the transporter, picked up one of the tools beside him, and stuck his head back to where it had recently been. He groaned.

Immediately, a pair of legs came to a stop beside him. "Can you repair it, Chief?" Commander Riker's voice was agitated.

O'Brien replied, "No problem, sir."

"Then what's the matter?"

"My head," he moaned. "I've got a hangover to beat all hangovers - worse than that, I didn't even get a chance to enjoy myself."

Riker said, "You'll have to take it up with Terri when you see her."

"Don't worry, I will." He carried on working for a few more minutes, then announced, "Done."

Riker said approvingly, "Good work. Away team, assemble on transporter pad." Joining them, Riker faced O'Brien. "Ready."

Worf and Terri came out from their makeshift shelter to face Dr. Goodall. Two of the four other women pointed weapons at them.

"Theresa, take the phaser from the Klingon or we will kill him, and you."

Worf shared a glance with Terri, briefly considering an attempt to overpower them - he could see a martial light shining in her eyes - but decided that stalling would be a better option. He handed his phaser reluctantly to Terri, who gave them both to Goodall.

"Come," Goodall ordered.

They had no choice but to accompany their captors. Goodall led; the escort herded Worf and Terri close behind her.

Terri said, "May I ask you something, Marie?"

Without faltering her steps in any way, Goodall said, "Speak."

"Am I a construct?"

Goodall did not reply until they had reached the main underground chamber again. Moving into the light, she spoke. "Ah. You know."

"It's true." Terri was numb. She did not want to believe, but Marie did not lie to her.

"Yes. Your parents were unable to have children because of a lethal gene combination. I offered my assistance in transposing those genes which caused the problem... but I did a little more than they thought. You are the result."

"It has been suggested, Marie, that you murdered my parents."

Goodall finally turned to look at her. She held out her arm, and the companion became quicksilver, flowing down to coalesce into the living crystal Terri recognised. Goodall held it tenderly in her hand. "They found out the truth regarding your nature."

"Why have you not come after her?" Worf wanted to know.

Goodall directed her emotionless gaze at him. "I have others. She is expendable, as are you."

Worf held Terri's wrist tightly - he could see the rage burning in her like a beacon, and pulled her back beside him. Catching her attention, he shook his head. "Later."

Riker and the away team found themselves in the room where the Enterprise personnel lay in their suspended state. The medics, led by Dr. Crusher, set to work immediately on reviving them.

Crusher came over to Riker. "We'll be a little while yet, Commander."

Riker acknowledged the statement, then opened communications with the Enterprise. "Things are going as planned here, Captain. Worf and Terri - any news on them?"

"We have a fix on their co-ordinates, Number One. They are still with the company Data indicated earlier." There was a pause. "Too close - Data cannot separate two of the readings."

"Shit," Riker swore. He indicated to some of the security officers to come to him, and checked his tricorder readings. "Too far for me to get to them?"

"Yes, Commander," said Data.

"Direct beam us to them," he suggested.

"Yes, sir," Data replied. "How many in your party?"

Riker did a quick head count. "Seven."

"Transferring information to transporter now. You will be with them in 33.6 seconds. Counting."

"Thank you, Data," Riker said, and waited.

"Are you going to kill us, Marie?" Terri asked.

Goodall pursed her lips. "If I have to. It would be a waste - something I cannot readily approve." She seemed to be re-appraising her opinion because she watched Worf the way a breeder of cattle does livestock. "I might be able to use the Klingon after all."

Worf allowed his fury to start to course through him; it felt good to have the hormones pumping into his muscles, a heady mixture that prepared him for battle. Beside him, Terri stiffened, clenching her hands until the knuckles showed white under her skin. Adrenalin surged in her too.

Worf felt himself ease into the frame of mind that meant he was ready to fight, and he marked time - the right moment would present itself.

As they moved off again, the moment came and he threw himself into furious action; seizing one of the women who carried a weapon, he broke her arm with a satisfying snap, causing the weapon to slip from nerveless fingers. A swift blow to her head knocked her out, and then he reached for the next, to find Terri had anticipated his movements, and gone into action herself.

She had managed to get the concealed knife in her boot, and had used it with telling effect on the woman she fought with - blood spouted from a dozen wounds - but Terri's lack of comparable physical strength began to take its toll. The other woman reached for her, and kicked Terri in the ribs, smashing into her knife hand. Worf heard Terri scream in pain, and he got to her in time to see the woman deliver a hard kick to her head.

Goodall and the two remaining women rushed in to join the fray, and Worf found himself fighting with four extremely strong females. He couldn't hope to win, but he would take as many of them with him as he could.

Just as Goodall levelled a phaser at him, she stiffened and dropped to the ground. Around him, other women fell to join her, and he crouched down to examine Terri. Very carefully, he felt her

rib-cage, and then her arm. Groaning, she opened her eyes. "Dammit, Worf - my head hurts."

Riker came and looked down at Worf. "How is she?"

"She," Terri whispered, "is going to throw up." And turning her head to avoid covering Worf, she retched violently.

Riker tapped his combadge. "Nine to beam up."

The familiar tingle of the transporter enveloped them, and as soon as they appeared on the platform, Worf picked up the injured woman, heading for sickbay. She was ominously quiet, so he hurried.

Reaching sickbay he left Terri in the capable hands of one of Beverley Crusher's staff. He decided he would be sorry to see her leave - she had spirit.

Hours later, the cleaning up had been finished to everyone's satisfaction. The personnel were all accounted for, with only a few minor injuries. Picard was highly gratified by the way things had turned out. Sitting in his chair on the bridge, Picard listened to the report he had compiled before sending it on to Starfleet H.Q.

Satisfied at last with the wording, he signalled for it to be transmitted.

"Mr. Worf, are the warning buoys in place?"

From the tactical console Worf rumbled, "Aye, sir."

"Mr. Crusher," Riker began, "set course for nearest starbase."

"Course set and laid in, sir," came the prompt reply.

"Let's get out of here," Riker said.

Things had been very quiet for the last four days en route for Starbase 59, and Riker was taking the time to relax a little. "...So it seems that most of the life on Cho'a has evolved symbiotic relationships with each other, the Hnr'uk'ri being at the top of the evolutionary tree, but not truly sentient without their Human partners."

"Quite fascinating, Number One," Picard agreed. "A truly remarkable eco-system that should have had more study."

"Yes. Shame about the hostile natives, sir."

"Indeed," Picard said.

Riker said, after a moment of thought, "Dr. Goodall's staff - whatever happened to them?"

"Something we may never find out, Will." Picard was quiet.

They walked in contemplation towards Riker's quarters, and to lighten the atmosphere a little, Picard asked, "And how is Dr. Walsh?"

"Fully recovered, sir." Riker's blue eyes shone with amusement. "She's driving the science department mad with all the work she is trying to catch up on. A veritable whirlwind."

The Captain sighed. "Yet another troublesome woman."

Riker smiled. "With a capital 'T' - but constructive."

"Yes, well - there is that I suppose, in recompense."

They literally bumped into Worf, who was standing outside the door of his cabin. He managed to look faintly embarrassed without changing his expression greatly.

"Worf," said Picard, by way of a greeting.

"Sir." The Klingon stood to attention, hands behind his back.

Picard asked, "You are off-duty?"

Worf nodded slightly, relaxing fractionally from his stiff pose.

The three of them stood in uncomfortable silence, so Riker broke it, saying, "Well, we'll leave you now, Worf."

Just as they started to go, the sound of footsteps echoed towards them, and a woman came into sight. Riker did not recognize her until she drew up to them, then his eyes widened in surprise.

Stunned, he asked, "Terri?"

She was very changed; chestnut hair flowing freely down her back, she wore a clinging, black dress made of silky stuff which left her neck and shoulders bare, and revealed her slim figure to startling effect. Long earrings swung as she gazed at them with innocent, forest green eyes.

Smiling blindingly, she said, "You're drooling, Commander."

Picard cleared his throat. "Quite."

Terri slipped a hand into the crook of Worf's elbow. "I thought we had a date?"

Worf really did look embarrassed now, but managed to retain enough dignity to bid the Captain and Riker a civil goodnight.

As they walked off together, Riker and Picard heard Terri's throaty laugh ring out at something Worf said to her. His voice was an answering rumble, and they could both see, unbelievably, a smile on the Klingon's mouth too.

Riker mouthed, "A date?" and shared a look with the Captain that spoke volumes.

Picard's eyebrows slowly climbed down, and he said, "I thought you and she... "

"Me!" Riker was astounded. "I've got enough to handle, thank you."

"Hmm - you think Worf...?"

Riker waved a hand dismissively, and uttered a snort. "The best man for the job, I assure you, sir."

Picard eyed him. "Ah - 'The Taming of the Shrew'."

Riker nodded. "My thinking exactly, sir - my thinking exactly."



THE HEADACHE

A headache! A headache?
That's a word I shouldn't hear.
Why, no-one's had a headache
For over fifty years!
I really cannot have that,
It's really quite absurd.
Now come and have some tests,
And not another word.

Amazing! Amazing!
I just don't understand.
These tests they tell me nothing
And neither does the scan.
I really can't accept this,
It really can't be true;
Just wait a moment longer
Till I think of what to do.

An answer. An answer.
The cause has been revealed.
Young Wesley's found the answer
Though it's not his chosen field.
The Ferengi Daimon caused it,
Though I cannot tell you why;
Number One will find the reason -
Or at least he's gonna try.

A reason, a reason.
Will Riker's found a clue.
Daimon Bok had caused it
To get revenge on you.
I'm glad we finally solved it
And the headache's gone at last.
Now just sit back and rest here -
"Let the past remain the past."

Helen Connor

